

ADOLESCENT GIRLS' EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL DIVORCE

by

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine adolescent girls experience of their parents' divorce. A review of the literature on this subject indicated that little research had been conducted on the adolescents' experience of parental divorce. The literature also indicated that the painful event of divorce can precipitate a number of emotional, behavioural, and cognitive changes in children.

This study utilized a phenomenological methodology. Specifically, the study sought to explore the participants' experience of parental divorce and interpret the results in conjunction with relevant theory.

Eight girls from age sixteen to nineteen participated in the study. These girls came from a home where a divorce had occurred within a nine year range, but had occurred at least one year since the time of the interviews. The participants were interviewed twice. The interviews were analyzed using the data analysis process described by Giorgi (1975). This analysis revealed twelve topic areas which were descriptive of the participants' experience of divorce. These topics were then organized around four main content areas, or processes. These processes were the experience of the divorce, the process of adapting to environmental changes, the learning and growing process, and the process of restructuring meaning and moving toward resolution.

The results were interpreted utilizing the literature on children from divorced homes, attribution theory, and just world theory. The present study shared many similarities with the literature on divorce, but differed in the degree of depression and maladjustment seen among the participants. The participants in this study, generally, were seen to highly-functioning, healthy individuals. The study also showed how the participants need for control in their lives was related to the theories posed by attribution theory and just world theory.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Divorce has become an increasingly pervasive phenomenon in industrialized societies during the latter half of this century. Since the reform of divorce laws in Canada on July 11, 1968, divorce rates have been increasing steadily (Ambert, 1980). In Canada there were 70,436 divorces granted in 1982. Of these, approximately 53% involved families with dependent children (Parry, 1986). British Columbia appears to have the highest divorce rate in the country. The large incidence of divorce found in British Columbia may be explained in part by Ambert's (1980) research. This study suggests that the highest divorce rates are found in provinces with high per capita income, high immigration rates, and a high level of economic development and urbanization.

The increase in divorce rates has caused a dramatic change to the traditional family structure. This change creates a need to understand the impact and consequences of divorce upon the lives of those affected. Considerable research has been conducted upon the effects of divorce upon adults (Kelly, 1981), and to a lesser degree research has examined children's reaction to divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). However, very little research has focused upon adolescents' reaction to parental divorce.

My clinical work with adolescent girls from divorced homes

suggests that there exists a pressing need to understand the effect that divorce can have. Research by Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985) supports my observations of the effect of divorce upon youngsters. These authors noted that, "In the first few years following divorce, children in divorced families in comparison to children in nondivorced families show more anti-social, impulsive acting out disorders, more aggression and noncompliance, more dependency, anxiety, and depression, more difficulties in social relationships, and more problem behavior in school" (p. 518). Wallerstein (1985) reports that results from a longitudinal study on children from divorced families suggest that "a significant number of children and adolescents were considered psychologically troubled at the 5-year mark. We had diagnosed moderate to severe clinical depression in over a third of the original sample" (p. 547).

A divorce is a difficult and traumatic adjustment for most adults to make. Children can experience divorce as even more traumatic. For some adults the trauma of the divorce may be lessened by their knowledge that they were involved, to some extent, in the decision to end their marriage. For children however the separation of their parents is generally experienced as a powerfully disruptive, painful, and frightening event, and is without the cushion of personal choice. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) note that most children found their parents' divorce extremely painful, and in most cases would have preferred their parents to remain together,

regardless of how dysfunctional the marriage was. In the instances where the primary caregiver, generally the mother, did not initiate or want to divorce, the remaining family may experience feelings of helplessness and abandonment (Schwartzberg, 1981).

The component of helplessness that is present in children's reaction to their parents' divorce is, I believe, a powerful factor in their ability to weather the pain of their parents' divorce and regain their sense of personal control. When the primary caregiver is also battling a sense of helplessness, amidst all the other difficulties which divorce can create, he/she may unwittingly perpetuate this sense in his or her children.

In summary, literature on the event of divorce suggests that divorce is a painful event which can precipitate a number of negative impediments in children's cognitive, emotional and social development. Wallerstein and Kelly (1985) believe that the results of divorce can continue to affect these children for many years. Given the pervasive effect of divorce upon children, it seems important to be able to identify the nature of the threat. In particular, an understanding of how children experience their parents' divorce, how they interpret and explain it, and how they believe it affects them, may help to shed some light on their behaviour.

Theoretical Background

Humankind has devoted a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy toward creating the belief that it has within its power the ability to control the random, negative events of life. Since the inception of recorded history, humankind has struggled to explain or rationalize life's traumas. Through this struggle, I believe, individuals have attempted to make their lives less random by subscribing to a philosophy or religion which seeks to give life meaning, and through meaning, control. Homer, one of humankind's earliest recorded storytellers, writes of the series of misfortunes which befall Odysseus because Poseidon bears him a grudge. Homer suggests that control was within Odysseus' reach, if only he could appease the gods.

My word, how mortals take the gods to task!
All their afflictions come from us, we hear.
(Homer, 1963, p. 2)

The Greeks developed a sophisticated pantheon of gods, to whom they ascribed responsibility for events in their lives. To regain control, one had to work to place oneself in the gods' good favour. The system was an elegant and astute one as it explained fully how life could contain unexpected and arbitrary events. It could also set individuals' minds at ease by providing them with some sense of control over their lives.

Philosophical systems such as the one developed by the Greeks have continued to seek to explain life's arbitrary

nature, and suggest how it may be brought under control. Rubin and Peplau (1975) suggest that religions such as Judaism and Christianity promote the belief that control over one's world may be attained through salvation and by adhering to the works of the Bible. It would be naive to suggest that a complex philosophical system such as the Christian religion may be explained solely by a search for personal power, but aspects of religious systems could arguably be means of ordering one's present life for something superior later on. Other dogmas, such as the "power of positive thinking" or strong work ethics, also offer hope of control over one's life. In fact, it seems that many people have distorted the original meaning of the Protestant work ethic, in order to give themselves a sense of control. John Calvin argued that good work was not sufficient to gain salvation, but that work is good by nature and should be its own reward (Smart, 1976). Much of contemporary culture has skewed this belief from - the reward to work is work itself, to the reward of work is a good life.

Of course, not everyone attempts to frame their view of reality around the need to feel in control over events in their lives. Camus, in The Myth of Sisyphus, argues that by acknowledging that "fate [is] a human matter, which must be settled among men" (1955, p. 91) we assign control to ourselves. Consequently life's unjust nature becomes more acceptable. Camus concludes that "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul makes me conclude that all is well" (p. 90). Job, in the Bible, argues that the world

is not a just, predictable place. A neighbour of Job disputes this argument by stating "Behold . . . God will not cast away an innocent man, neither will he uphold evildoers" (Rubin & Peplau, 1975, p. 65). Job counters this argument by stating that "though I be innocent, He shall prove me perverse" (p. 65).

Several psychological theories attempt to understand and explain individuals' need to be able to predict and control their world. One such theory, the just world hypothesis, is defined by Lerner and Miller (1978) as:

Individuals have a need to believe that they live in a world where people generally get what they deserve. The belief that the world is just enables the individual to confront his physical and social environment as though they were stable and orderly. (p. 1030)

When traumatic events happen to individuals, the loss of these individuals' faith in their world as a predictable and fair place can be so shattering they encounter "a vast breakdown of faith in the larger human matrix supporting each individual's life, and therefore a loss of faith or 'trust in the structure of existence'" (Lifton, in Lerner & Miller, p. 1031).

Children are especially vulnerable to utilizing the just world hypothesis as we often teach our children that the world is a just and fair place. Television, myths and fairy tales emphasize the lesson that good things arise from good behaviour and bad things from bad behaviour. Rubin and Peplau (1975) argue that parents often shape their children's belief system as such in order to promote acceptable behaviour. The authors suggest that "these teachings may foster accurate perceptions of causal relationships: Hard work at school may well be rewarded

by a good report card. But in other instances the prescriptions may distort reality" (p. 73).

Lerner (1974, in Rubin & Peplau, 1975), describes a developmental analysis of how children acquire a just world understanding of the world. Lerner suggests that children initially begin with a belief in the "pleasure principle", and then through encouragement via their environment move onto a "reality principle", which is the act of delaying present gratification in order to achieve more, through greater and prolonged effort, later. This transition requires that the child make a personal contract with him or herself to delay gratification. In order to believe in this contract, the child must believe that self-denial and increased efforts will lead to something worth waiting for. The child needs to believe that his or her world is such a place where his or her personal contract can be completed. Logically, s/he must believe that in order to achieve what I deserve, others must also get what they deserve. "After all, the individual may reason, if other people do not get what they deserve, then I may not either - and this possibility is likely to be highly threatening" (p. 74).

Attribution theory suggests that people attempt to understand and explain the causes of behaviour and events (Wortman & Dintzer, 1978; Young & Marks, 1986). This theory argues that individuals attempt to understand whether outcomes in their lives are contingent upon their behaviours. A brief summary of attribution theory research suggests that when individuals feel they can exert control over events in their

lives they respond positively, and when they feel they have limited control over events in their lives they may experience feelings of helplessness and or depression (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). In psychological literature, attribution theory is commonly accepted as one way to describe the internal dialogue individuals utilize in order to explain and predict their world (Hammen, 1987).

Attributions are also linked to one's expectations of a just world. Rubin and Peplau (1975) argue that "a strong belief in a just world may be linked to a sense of personal or internal control over one's outcomes" (p. 74). Previous findings (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) show that the expectation that one's rewards or punishments are contingent upon one's own behaviour is correlated with measures on a just world scale.

The argument that people need to feel in control of their world and attempt to find control through a subscription to some philosophical perspective is a well-documented one. Also, it can be argued that individuals utilize an internal dialogue in order to understand and predict their world. This dialogue, or attributional process, is a psychological framework which people may utilize in order to feel in control of their world. Research has also indicated that if individuals' personal philosophy is challenged by a contradictory event, the challenge is experienced as a highly threatening one.

Children from divorced homes experience a powerfully disruptive and negative event, and one which may cause children to question their existing belief in their world as a

predictable and generally fair place. As well, because children have limited control over their parents' decision to divorce, the event of divorce may create a sense of helplessness in the children. These feelings of helplessness and depression seem to be a common experience among children from divorced homes (Wallerstein 1985). As the literature suggests that these feelings can be destructive ones (Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Seligman, 1986), understanding more about how children experience and interpret their parents' divorce could be helpful in alleviating some of the problems encountered by the growing number of children who come from divorced homes.

Purpose of the Study

Research suggests that divorce can be the precipitating factor behind many problems exhibited by children from divorced homes (Forehand, Middleton & Long, 1987). Research also suggests that how children understand and explain events in their lives is linked to their resulting behaviour (Brown & Siegel, 1988). How children experience and give meaning to their parents' divorce would then seem to be an important topic for study. Children have little control over the changes that divorce causes in their lives. Experiencing a loss of control can be a threatening event which research suggests can lead to a sense of helplessness, or a distortion of the degree of control they actually exert. For example, Hetherington (1979) notes that young children from divorced homes often are likely to blame themselves when they interpret the cause of their parents' divorce. Research by Janoff-Bulman (1979) suggests that this type of self-blame is utilized by individuals to ward off the more terrifying feeling that they have little control over their world.

According to Santrock (1987), and the present author's review of the literature, little research has been conducted on the adolescent's experience of divorce. Research that has been conducted suggests that adolescents experience some common reactions to their parents divorce such as depression, acting out behaviours, anxiety over their future and emotional and social regression (Wallerstein, 1985). Adolescence is

typically a stressful period for many teenagers, and the added burden of parental divorce, according to Wallerstein and Kelly (1974, in Anthony, 1974) may carry the "potential for severely overburdening the adolescent ego in its maturational, time-appointed tasks" (p. 483). Consequently, exploring teenagers' experience of their parents' divorce seems to be an important subject to understand more fully.

The present study has chosen to limit the research population to adolescent girls from divorced or separated homes who are not actively engaged in psychiatric or psychological treatment. The decision to limit the population in this way was based first upon socialization literature which suggests that male and female gender-role development often leads to different types of socially-acceptable behaviours for similar events (Rice, 1981). Secondly, as the study hopes to examine the experience of divorce, it was thought that a time interval between the initial separation and the adolescents' involvement in the present study would be appropriate. This time interval will help to focus the study upon the child's experience of the divorce rather than upon the initial crisis stage. Most people need time in order to make sense of the events in their lives. Once this time interval has occurred, it seemed somewhat irrelevant as to whether the actual divorce had occurred. Also, often when children are involved, the divorce proceedings can be delayed by custody disputes. Therefore it was decided that this study would include children from homes where either a divorce or separation had occurred. Last, it was thought

that limiting the population to a non-clinical one would help reduce other variables that may be affecting a child's understanding of her parents' divorce, such as the effects of drug therapy or somatic illness.

Given that the event of divorce is a complex life event, an examination of a child's experience of the divorce would seem to demand a broad investigation of the event. Phenomenology is the "discipline that devotes itself to the study of how things appear to consciousness or are given in experience" (Giorgi, deKoning, & Ashworth, 1986, p. 6). A phenomenological methodology then would seem to be well-suited to the study of the experience of divorce.

In summary, the purposes of the present study are as follows:

1. To describe how adolescent girls view their experience of their parents' divorce. Part of this experience may include how the girls interpreted and understood the divorce.
2. To analyze the shared experiences of the adolescent girls in order to identify common themes and or issues.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Need for Study

Little research has focused upon the effect divorce has upon children. Wallerstein (1985) comments "it is striking that the aptly described Children of Armageddon (Watson, 1969) who are caught up in the intense battle of their parents have been the subject of so much public concern yet have been so little studied and so poorly served" (p. 516). There appears to be an even greater paucity of research conducted upon the adolescent's experience of divorce. Santrock (1987) observes that there are still few empirical studies on the effects of divorce on adolescents. As well, feminist literature suggests that girls may experience relationships, and in this case the breakdown of relationships, differently from boys. Gilligan (1982) suggests that adolescent girls' identities are "inwardly and interpersonally defined", which suggests that they may feel more vulnerable and responsible when faced with parental divorce (p. 13).

The Process and Experience of Divorce

The experience of divorce is unique to each individual. For children, Anthony (1974) describes the reactions as being

dependent upon age, stage of development, gender, quality of early environment, amount of stress previously experienced, the ability of the parents to provide security, the extent of family disharmony prior to divorce, personality, and parents' relationship. The most consistent observation is summarized by Hetherington (1979) who comments that almost all children find the transition of divorce to be a very painful one.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985) note that "a substantial body of both clinical and research literature has accumulated which shows that most children experience their parents' divorce as a stressful life event and exhibit short-term developmental disruptions, emotional distress, and behavior disorders" (p. 518). Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) believe that "the increased incidence of divorce illustrates that it is the most pervasive of the "severe" psychological stressors (DSM III) for children" (p. 531).

Schwartzberg (1981) describes the divorce process as one in which the family system is altered but not terminated. He sees the process of divorce as being divisible by three stages: a predivorce stage, a stage of separation, and the postdivorce stage. Attachment theory describes divorce also as a process extending over time which involves specific loss-related tasks to be worked through. Bowlby (1960) has described four phases as a reaction to separation: denial, protest, despair, and detachment (in Schwartzberg, 1981). The reactions to the separation may be "temporary or prolonged and are dependent upon the child's and parents' ages, coping capacity, support

systems, degree of stress experienced, and the extent to which previous losses have been mastered and worked through" (Schwartzberg, 1981, p. 125).

Hetherington (1979) employs a crisis model in describing the process of divorce for the short-term. She notes that children must respond to immediate changes in their situation such as the loss of a parent, disharmony, family unorganization and changes in parent-child relationships that may be caused by the uncertainty, distress and discord of the divorce. Hetherington (1979) sees the predivorce and separation stages as being characterized by stresses associated with conflict, loss, change, and uncertainty. Ambert (1980) sums the divorce process up using Wiseman's 1975 crisis model. Divorce can be treated as "a normal process with specific tasks to be mastered, recognizable stresses to be dealt with, and satisfactions and goals to be sought for" (p. 18).

The Age of the Child

A child's age seems to be a prevailing factor when examining the experience of divorce from a child's perspective. Hetherington (1979) notes that the adaptation of the child depends upon which point the child has reached developmentally. Wallerstein (1985) asserts that there is a "critical significance of the child's age and developmental stage in governing the child's initial response in white, middle-class populations" (p. 515). The very young child relies greatly

upon his or her parents and is restricted more to the home. Consequently, the young child's coping strategies and responses will differ from the adolescent's, who enjoys greater independence, and greater social and cognitive competencies. Hetherington emphasizes that the experience of divorce between children of differing ages varies qualitatively in responses, but that the trauma and painful experience of loss is relatively stable across ages. A key difference for young children is their lack of ability to accurately evaluate and understand the rift between their parents. Hetherington (1979) notes that "thus, the young child is likely to be more self-blaming in interpreting the cause of divorce, and to distort grossly perceptions of the parents' emotions, needs, and behavior, as well as the prospects of reconciliation or total abandonment" (p. 853). The adolescent, after the initial trauma is over, is better equipped to deal with conflicts over loyalties, changes in economic status, fear of abandonment, and more accurately understand and assign responsibility for the cause of the divorce (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974).

Anthony (1974) asserts that the issue of loss is central to a child's developmental stage. "In the younger child one is dealing with the problem of how to substitute for loss, and in the older child how to grieve adequately for the loss" (p. 475).

Wallerstein (1985) notes several universal responses among children across age groups. Initially there is a wish to undo the divorce. Wallerstein also comments that both children and

adolescents suffer from "anxiety, depression, worry over one or both parents, rising anger at parents, loyalty conflicts, and guilt" (p. 546). While these responses are consistent across ages, the emotions and perceptions underlying them will be governed by the child's developmental stage.

Wallerstein and Kelly's 1980 extensive study on divorce delves deeply into the child's experience of divorce and differences in developmental stages. From this study the authors comment that children and adolescents also universally tend to experience a sense of fear which arises from a heightened sense of their vulnerability and from their loss of a sense of security and continuity. "They confronted a world which suddenly appeared to have become less reliable, less predictable, and less likely in their view to provide for their needs and expectations" (p. 45). This shared experience between the different age groups raises the question of how differently divorce does impact upon older versus young children. One other interesting question is whether these themes persist throughout childhood. For instance, if a child interpreted his or her world as unpredictable and unreliable as a result of his or her parents' divorce, may this cognitive appraisal continue through to adolescence? Other common themes the authors noted were a sense of rejection from the departed parent particularly because parents can become preoccupied with concerns such as loneliness, conflicted loyalties, anger, and worry over their sense of vulnerability and impending economic and domestic changes.

In Surviving the Breakup (1980), Wallerstein and Kelly describe their systematic investigation of children's experience of their parents' divorce, utilizing a ten year longitudinal research design. Wallerstein and Kelly's study, like the present study, was interested in exploring children's experience of divorce in a nonclinical population. Wallerstein and Kelly studied 131 children and adolescents using interviews, psychological and social assessments. The study initially interviewed the children and family members soon after the marital separation, and were re-examined again at 18 months, 5 years, and 10 years.

Wallerstein and Kelly are unique among authors of divorce literature in that they found that the responses and experiences of children from divorced homes tended to fall into consistent age and developmental groups. Other authors have explored the effect of divorce upon children using a longitudinal design also (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985), and have noted some fairly consistent responses among the children. Wallerstein and Kelly's study is particularly useful though as it examines the experience peculiar to the adolescent. Wallerstein and Kelly began their ten year longitudinal study in 1971 in California using a nonclinical population of sixty families.

The Adolescent Experience

A central theme in the adolescent experience seems to be the adolescent's confusion over the reversal of the leave-taking process. Where normally the teenager would be preparing for eventual independence, divorce creates circumstances where one or more parent undergoes a similar process. Adolescence typically is a period where the child tests him/herself against his or her impending independence. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) describe this process as a type of pendulum, where the child ventures toward psychological and physical disengagement from his or her family, risks more mature and independent behaviours, and then reverts back to more childish behaviour, returning and using the home as a safe and stable base.

After divorce, the child's home is disrupted, changed and often unpredictable. In many families, the parents' needs now become the focus of attention as the adults change roles and begin to question their own existing sexual, social, vocational and personal identities. Consequently, parents make changes to their lifestyles that sometimes parallel those their children are making, such as an increased focus on instigating new sexual liaisons. The results of these changes, according to Wallerstein and Kelly, particularly the adults' changes in sexual partners, can make their children feel as if they are in competition with their parents. This competition was especially painful for the children as they had all, at some

conscious or unconscious level, counted on their parents to provide them with a secure, dependable home that was a safe haven for them during the risky years of adolescence. As one thirteen year old youngster commented, "I felt I was being thrown out into the world before I was ready!" (p. 83).

They also had counted on their parents to represent traditional values, to maintain similar identities to those they had grown up with, and typically were far more comfortable seeing their parents as nonsexual, stodgy, predictable people. The turmoil and crisis in the adults though pushed them to new behaviours and lifestyles that often reduced the generation gap between themselves and their children, and this reduction the children often found tremendously threatening. The youngsters also reported feeling threatened and distressed by the youthful lovers some parents chose. As Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) note, some new lovers were painfully close in age to the adolescents in the study, further adding to the children's conscious or unconscious sense that they now were in competition with their parents, and their parents' lovers.

The post divorce home, according to Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), is often one that contains turmoil while members shift their roles. Parents must work through their own emotional problems and at the same time try to maintain a sense of order and discipline in the home. Because the new family structure is often a shaky one, discipline may be looser and routines altered. This loosening of discipline in the home can be detrimental to teenagers who often do not yet command internal

controls necessary to order their lives and monitor potentially harmful behaviour. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) comment:

some of the youngsters lacked inner controls, the consolidated conscience and independent capacity to make judgements that they needed to maintain themselves without strong parental support and guidance. The divorce left them feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses, and surrounded by the temptations of the adolescent world without the supports that would hold them to a straight course. (p. 83)

Part of the developmental process for teenagers typically includes a new awareness of themselves as sexual creatures. In fact, relationships and sexuality seems often to be an all-consuming part of many teenagers' lives today. This process can be a confusing and intimidating one for some teenagers, and is exacerbated by a new perception of their parents as sexually active as well. A consistent theme among the teenagers was their fear that their parents' failed marriage foreshadowed their own future success in relationships and marriage. Sadly, this sense of foreshadowment may contain some element of truth in it as many of the parents did not possess the reconciliatory skills necessary to effectively resolve differences, hence the result of some of their marital problems. One youngster commented he had never witnessed an argument resolved fairly until he was once able to watch a friend's parents resolve their differences.

Wallerstein and Kelly noted other concerns among the children, such as loyalty conflicts between their parents, a profound sense of loss, and an exposed and vulnerable feeling which often caused increased anxiety. This increased anxiety had a tendency to magnify problems, such as the ordinary,

predictable concerns of adolescence, and the problems created by the divorce, such as financial concerns, loyalty conflicts, moving homes and changed roles.

According to Wallerstein and Kelly the divorce also seemed to precipitate emotional and intellectual growth among some of the teenagers. It seemed that some aspects of the divorce, such as their parents' infidelity, caused the youngsters to question their existing value systems. Many desperately wanted to avoid the mistakes that their parents had made. Consequently, the children worked hard at understanding the causes and roles of their parents in the divorce. This meant that children's perceptions of their parents could fluctuate greatly as they attempted to analyze their parents' roles in the divorce. It was not uncommon for children to suddenly alter their perceptions of their parents. One day a parent could be seen as a hero and the next a villain. These changing perceptions caused the children to search elsewhere for role models, and many looked to themselves to redefine their own moral code. Having witnessed their parents not abide by a moral code they had previously ascribed to and taught to their children, they often felt that their own moral code had been shattered. Consequently, Wallerstein and Kelly found many of these youngsters struggling to define their own sense of personal morality. "Their purpose was serious and mature as they sought to determine standards to guide their own behavior in the present and the future" (p. 89). Of the adolescents studied, about one-third showed an increased maturity after

their parents' divorce. This growth in maturity can probably be traced in part to the emotional and intellectual growth that arose from challenging their unquestioned parental value system and defining their own. Also, the divorce created a need for these youngsters to assume a more responsible and supportive role in the family.

The majority of the remaining adolescents in the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) study, the authors noted, showed some emotional and behavioural problems after their parents' divorce. Although for many of the teenagers, understanding personal morality was an important issue, not all redefined their roles favourably. It is possible that the combination of loosened discipline and confusion over what is right and wrong may have led to the loss of familiar controls and direction for the children, and as a result behaviours such as petty thievery, promiscuity, poor self-esteem, pervasive sadness, school potential below normal, compulsive overeating, and chronic irritability were seen. In an eighteen month follow-up study, the authors found that childhood depression was pervasive in about one-quarter of the children and adolescents, and manifested itself in many of the behaviours listed above. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) noted that "one potential major impact of divorce is either to drive adolescent development forward at a greatly accelerated tempo, or bring it to a grinding halt" (p. 83).

The review of the literature illustrates that divorce is perceived by children and adolescents to be a painful event.

Research suggests that the experience of parental divorce is one which seems to provoke some disturbing behaviours in children and also precipitate emotional maladjustment. Divorce then appears to be an area of concern in psychology. Also, Santrock (1987) notes that there has been little research conducted upon the adolescent experience of divorce. Consequently, research on adolescents' experience of parental divorce seems to be warranted in order to document this event more completely.

Summary

It is apparent from this review of the literature that parental divorce affects the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural well-being of children in a number of ways. The children's experience of their parents' divorce is naturally unique to each individual, and this accounts for the breadth of responses described by the literature. However, research has also noted some consistent responses across and peculiar to ages. Across ages, Hetherington (1979) commented that all children find the experience of divorce to be a painful one. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) noted that most children described a desire to undo the divorce, and experienced feelings of anxiety, worry and depression. Wallerstein and Kelly also noted that as younger children are more dependent upon their parents, their coping strategies differed from adolescents. For adolescents the divorce caused a rift in their normal

developmental process. In particular, the adolescent's development in the areas of sexuality, emotional and social growth, and intellectual and moral understanding of his or her world were affected. It was noted that development may not only remain static, but can be impelled forward in some areas and or be reverted backwards.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The present study is interested in describing the experience of divorce for adolescent girls. As the study seeks to describe the participants' experience, a phenomenological methodology was utilized. This chapter will describe the procedure followed, and how rigour was attained.

Procedure

Participants

Criteria for selection.

An adolescent-aged population was chosen for two reasons. First, based upon findings by Santrock (1987) and Wallerstein (1985), there has been little research conducted upon the adolescent's experience of divorce. Secondly, my own work in a clinical setting suggested that this age group seemed to be experiencing particular difficulty in adapting to their parents' divorce. Hetherington (1979) comments that young children can feel vulnerable as a result of their parents' divorce because they recognize the degree to which they are physically and emotionally dependent upon their parents. While teenagers are still emotionally and physically dependent upon their parents, it is to a lesser degree than children. In addition, teenagers more commonly tend to experiment with

dangerous methods of mitigating their pain and confusion. As a result, suicide, substance abuse and promiscuity were common among the adolescent-aged girls from divorced homes which I worked with. Before one is able to help these troubled youngsters though, it is important first to understand their experience and understanding of the event. As outsiders we can only guess at how the youngsters make sense of their parents' divorce and the impact it has upon them.

The decision was made to utilize only adolescent-aged girls in the study, rather than both males and females. This was a difficult choice to make, but was based upon personal experience and the literature on socialization which suggests that gender role development differs for males and female (Rice, 1981). As well, expectations of female children in families may differ from those held of male children. As a result female children may assume different roles, such as caregiving responsibilities, in the family. Consequently, socially acceptable ways of expressing one's pain and confusion may differ between males and females. Therefore, in order to ally the methodology of the present study with Sandelowski's (1986) criteria, it was thought that themes drawn from the data would be more meaningful and representative if it were drawn from a relatively homogeneous group.

The third criterion entailed setting the age limits of the participants between age 16 and 19. As there are generally large movements in maturity during this developmental time, an

attempt was made to keep the age group relatively homogeneous. Also, as the developmental process is one of moving both forward and backward (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1985), using older teenagers helped keep the population within the boundaries of adolescence.

Fourth, the decision was made to include youngsters from a home where either a divorce or a separation had occurred. The criterion of divorce versus separation is an important distinction because children may view their parents' legal divorce differently from their parents' initial separation. It seems possible that in homes where only a separation has occurred, the child may cling to the hope that reconciliation could still occur. This hope may alter the child's interpretation of the event. On the other hand, the divorce process can be a lengthy one, particularly when children are involved. Custody disputes over children are common and can take years to resolve. Consequently it was decided to use participants from either a divorced home or a home where a separation had occurred. I believe that the initial concern can be lessened by only using children from homes where the separation occurred over a year earlier. This time frame should help to diminish the children's initial fervent hope for reconciliation and help to make the group more homogeneous.

Establishing this time frame also helped to meet other criteria. As the emphasis on the study was to understand the experience of divorce, it was thought that by the time one year

had elapsed the youngsters would probably have moved past the initial crisis stage described by Hetherington (1979), through the grieving process of denial and shock, and come to some understanding of the event. Schwartzberg (1981) also describes the divorce process as being divisible by three stages: a predivorce stage, a stage of separation, and the postdivorce stage. The time frame this study utilizes will ensure that the participants are well into the separation stage, and many also will have reached the postdivorce stage.

It was also decided to include girls for whom the divorce had occurred from age ten and older. This would require that the actual separation of their parents had occurred, at the most, no more than nine years previously. This time frame, it was thought, would give the girls ample time to have considered the event, while still having had the event occur recently enough to have maintained a fairly clear memory of it.

Fifth, it was decided to include only girls from a nonclinical population, with the proviso that families that had gone for treatment after the shock of the divorce could be included. This criterion was based on the assumption that an understanding of teenage girls' experience of divorce was best drawn from a relatively homogeneous group. Including a child who had or was undergoing indepth psychiatric or psychological treatment could add numerous other variables to the child's understanding of the event. On the other hand, girls whose families had sought help following the divorce to facilitate the process, or girls who had sought help from school counsellors,

were included in the study. These responses were thought to be appropriate responses to a crisis, and it seemed reasonable to include this group. Therefore, girls who described themselves as 'normal' became the targeted participants.

The sixth criterion required girls who were comfortable and willing to be involved in a study of this nature. The interviewing process necessitated girls who were comfortable talking about themselves and who were accustomed to describing their thoughts, experiences and feelings. Last, both the girls and their custodial parent or guardian were willing to give written consent to the girls' participation in the study.

Selection procedure.

The participants were contacted either by word of mouth or by signs posted at community centers such as the White Rock Womens' Center.

The purpose of the study, to understand the experience of divorce from a teenager's perspective, was explained to the participants. A letter outlining the study and including the consent form was given to the participants. The researcher ensured that the participants understood the content of the letter. The consent portion was also reviewed. The consent portion requested signatures from both the participant and the parent with whom the child was currently residing. The consent form requested permission for the child to participate in the

study and to be audiotaped during the interview. The researcher's home phone number was included in the information form, and the researcher encouraged both the participant and parent to contact her for further information. Once the consent form had been signed, the participant was asked to phone the researcher, and an interview time was set.

The interviews were conducted in the participants' homes, and each interview was between one to two hours in length.

Data Collection

The data were collected by the use of audiotaped interviews conducted in the respondents' homes. Eight subjects were interviewed twice. The first and second interviews were approximately two weeks apart.

A written interview guide was developed for use in the initial interviews (see Appendix C). This guide was based upon Giorgi (1975) An Application of Phenomenological Method in Psychology, and upon the review of literature. This knowledge base provided the researcher with a place to begin in the interviews. As well, it provided a check-list for significant areas to be covered. From this base, the researcher and respondents were able to identify and explore new themes that were relevant to the respondents. The interview guide was particularly useful to help draw out some of the shyer respondents, and to provide some initial structure which helped to develop rapport. For the more gregarious respondents, the

interview guide was not as useful.

The researcher tried to phrase open-ended questions to encourage the respondents' perspective. Spradley (1979), in The Ethnographic Interview, describes how the exploration process is enhanced by using descriptive questions. Spradley states that the qualitative interview process is greatly improved by making repeated explanations of your purpose, restating what respondents say, and asking for usage rather than meaning. Spradley comments that asking questions such as "why would you do that" and "what do you mean by that," contain a judgemental tone to them that do not assist the interviewing process. Qualitative research hopes to delineate the respondent's understanding of an event, which suggests that "both questions and answers must be discovered from informants" (Spradley, 1979, p. 84). Therefore, questions should be phrased to encourage the respondent's understanding of the experience, rather than the researcher's understanding.

A second interview guide was designed for the second set of interviews based upon information learned from the initial interviews. An attempt was made to follow Sandelowski's suggestion to attain rigour by asking the respondents whether the themes identified from the first set of interviews seemed relevant and fit their experience. As well, atypical elements were discussed with the respondents.

Data Analysis

After each interview was completed, it was transcribed by the researcher. Giorgi (1975) suggests four steps to be followed in the data analysis process. First, one reads through the transcribed interview to attain a sense of the whole interview. Next, look for "meaning units" in the respondents' discussion, which are natural paragraphs that revolve around one another. After defining these units, the researcher tries to state the theme that dominates each unit. Giorgi then suggests the researcher examine the themes and the raw data from the perspective of what the study wished to explore. For example, do these data or suggested themes or topics describe how the respondent viewed her experience of her parents' divorce? Does this theme explain and account for how the respondent understood her parents' divorce? Does this theme describe how the respondent felt the divorce affected her? Once these themes have been delineated, the researcher then tries to "tie together into a descriptive statement the essential, non-redundant themes" (Giorgi, 1975, p. 88). Giorgi suggests that this be accomplished by describing the "situated" level and the "general" level. The situated level includes the specifics of the actual research situation and the general involves aspects which appear to be transsituational. Giorgi (1975) comments that:

the situated descriptions generally have value in trying to understand the world of the subject, or in more familiar terms, they have idiographic value. The general descriptions, on the other hand, have a nomothetic value. One would try to relate them to other findings . . . and with other phenomena in a more theoretical context. (p. 97)

Based upon this analysis, the researcher was able to identify themes peculiar to each respondent, themes shared by some and or all respondents, and themes similar to those reported by research.

Rigour in a Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methods of research have been criticized for failing to conform to recognized standards of scientific inquiry and measurement. The majority of the criticism has been directed at the tendency of qualitative research to not follow established scientific standards in order to achieve the criteria of validity and reliability. As the present study proposes to use a qualitative method of inquiry, it seems necessary to examine some of these criticisms.

Kerlinger (1986) broadly describes validity as a research design that actually measures what it proposes to measure. Because the social sciences generally attempts to measure and understand constructs rather than physical phenomenon, the question of are we measuring what we think we are measuring is especially germane. Consequently, the existence of validity in a study is crucial to determine. Traditionally, quantitative research has sought to establish validity through various methodological requirements, such as establishing representativeness in measuring instruments to assure content validity, by comparing results with other related external variables to establish criterion-related validity, and establish construct validity by comparison to related theory. In general, a researcher hopes to be able to elucidate the actual nature of a variable without distorting it through a research design that may alter the phenomenon being studied, through misinterpretation of

the variable by using inappropriate theory, or through sampling or statistical distortions, such as regression to the mean.

Another central requirement for the establishment of rigour is the existence of reliability in a research design. Kerlinger (1986) defines reliability as the accuracy and stability of a measuring instrument. Accuracy and stability are obviously important to an instrument's predictive ability. Predictive ability, some social scientists would argue, is the cynosure of psychology. Much psychological research focuses on discovering 'truths' from which laws can be derived, and from these laws the prediction of human thought and action (Bruyn, 1970; Mishler, 1979). Therefore, without a reliable and a valid research design, there can be little confidence placed in the conclusions made from a study.

In the social sciences there has been a controversy existing for some time about whether traditional quantitative measures are adequate to meet the necessary demands of validity and reliability. Mishler (1979) argues that traditional methods fail to meet these criteria because they remove the subjects of studies out of their normal context. This removal renders the results artificial. Giorgi (1975) suggests that there is a place and a need for both quantitative and qualitative research in the social sciences. Quantitative schools, Giorgi comments, have not encouraged qualitative schools because they are not conducive to traditional measures of rigour. However, Giorgi suggests that a qualitative methodology is able to meet the requirements of rigour by

focusing on natural human experience. In doing so the design becomes both valid and reliable.

My expression intends to communicate that it is possible to have a human science of psychology and that situated within this context psychology can still be practiced with rigor and discipline, and yet do justice to all human psychological phenomena. In order to accomplish this task, however, the key notions of science (e.g., objectivity, rigor, research, etc) and even the notion of science itself will have to be expanded. (Giorgi, 1975, p. 82)

Sandelowski (1986) suggests that qualitative research can be valid because "the truth value of a qualitative investigation generally resides in the discovery of human phenomena or experiences as they are lived and perceived by subjects, rather than in the verification of a priori conceptions of those experiences" (p. 30). Guba and Lincoln (in Sandelowski, 1986) suggest using different criteria to judge the rigour of qualitative research. Credibility and applicability, they suggest, are more appropriate measures to gauge validity in a qualitative study. Credibility exists when a study accurately and faithfully represents a particular human experience. Credibility can be judged by the degree to which subjects and others agree to and identify with the accuracy of that which is portrayed.

Applicability is related to the generalizability of findings and the representativeness of subjects and measures. Sandelowski comments that generalizability is an illusive phenomenon in any type of research.

From the qualitative perspective, generalizability is based on the reification of a context-free structure that does not exist and the assumption that the multiple realities in any given situation can be controlled to illuminate the effects of a few variables. (Sandelowski, 1986, p. 31)

Still, qualitative research cannot lay claim to large sample sizes which, in quantitative research, help to support the generalizability of a study to a degree. Because of the volume of the data that is generated through interviews with subjects, sample sizes in qualitative research practically must keep their sample sizes relatively small. Guba and Lincoln (in Sandelowski, 1986) suggest that fittingness be used as a gauge then to determine the applicability of a study. Fittingness describes how well "findings can 'fit' into contexts outside the study situation and when its audience views its findings as meaningful and applicable in terms of their own experiences" (p. 32).

Reliability, the consistency, stability and dependability of a test, is best measured by the criterion of auditability (Sandelowski, 1986). Reliability is generally believed to exist when a study can be replicated and shown to have consistent findings with the original study. Qualitative research however emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals and environments, and consequently does not emphasize generalizability in the same sense. Auditability, Sandelowski argues, is the more appropriate measure as it exists when the "decision trail" left by a researcher can be clearly followed and another researcher could arrive at similar conclusions using similar data, perspectives and situations.

Sandelowski (1986) suggests a number of strategies to increase the credibility and applicability of a qualitative study.

1. Avoid the "elite bias," the tendency to utilize the most articulate, accessible or high-status members in a group.

2. Establish the typicality of events, behaviours and responses of the subjects lives.

3. Avoid the "holistic fallacy" which tends to make data appear to be more systematic than they may be.

To achieve these, Sandelowski (1986) suggests the researcher include:

1) Checking for the representativeness of the data as a whole and of coding categories and examples used to reduce and present the data; 2) triangulating across data sources and data collection procedures to determine the congruence of findings among them; 3) checking that descriptions, explanations, or theories about the data contain the typical and atypical elements of the data; 4) deliberately trying to discount or disprove a conclusion drawn about the data; and 5) obtaining validation from the subjects themselves (p. 35).

Sandelowski also suggests that auditability can be achieved by describing, explaining, or justifying:

1) How the researcher became interested in the subject matter of the study, 2) how the researcher views the thing studied, 3) the specific purpose(s) of the study, 4) how subjects or pieces of evidence came to be included in the study and how they were approached, 5) the impact the subjects or evidence and the researchers had on each other, 6) how the data were collected, 7) how long data collection lasted, 8) the nature of the setting(s) in which data were collected, 9) how the data were reduced or transformed for analysis, interpretation and presentation, 10) how various elements of the data were weighted, 11) the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of the categories developed to contain the data, and 12) the specific techniques used to determine the truth value and applicability of the data (p. 35).

The present study has attempted to meet the criteria for rigour identified by Sandelowski by:

- a) following the criteria outlined,
- b) clearly identifying the researcher's interest, personal view, and purpose of the study.

Assumptions

In a qualitative study which seeks to explore individual experience, it is often wise to articulate the researcher's assumptions upon the topic. Researcher's assumptions have the potential to influence the data, particularly when they are not clearly elucidated. Sandelowski (1986) suggests that by identifying the researcher's assumptions, auditability, or validity, can be maintained.

This researcher's assumptions seem to fall within two groups: a) my beliefs around the experience of divorce and, b) my beliefs around how the research should be conducted.

Clearly, I began this study with the belief that divorce is experienced as traumatic by children. This belief was born out of watching my own stepchildren struggle with their parents' divorce. I also believe that divorce is a trauma in children's lives, and that experiencing trauma in childhood can effect children's belief systems as they age. For myself, I believe that just world theory and attribution theory help to explain how individuals make sense of an unpredictable and sometimes frightening world.

The choice of methodology was influenced by Giorgi's (1975) research on conducting phenomenological research. Consequently, the data collection and analysis process in this study was shaped by Giorgi's research. Sandelowski (1986) has influenced my position on attaining validity and reliability in a study of this nature.

Ethical Concerns

An initial concern was that the respondent and the respondent's parent would be given the opportunity to consider their involvement in the study in a non-threatening way in the absence of the researcher. To assist in this, a letter of introduction was first given to the participants describing the nature and requirements of the study. Consent was also asked, in writing, of both the participant and the participant's custodial parent. The researcher wished to ensure that both the respondent and the respondent's parent clearly understood the purpose and nature of the study.

The participants were also assured of confidentiality. Confidentiality was achieved by not using the participants' names or any identifying features in the thesis. As well, all transcripts and tape recordings of the interviews will be destroyed after completion of both the the thesis and any further scholarly papers based upon the interviews. The tape recorded interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

The respondents were informed that there were no financial remunerations for participating in the study, and that they could end their involvement in the study at any time if they wished.

Summary

This chapter has identified the selection procedure utilized in the present study, the methods of data collection, and data analysis. This chapter has described some of the criticisms commonly levelled at qualitative methodologies. It has attempted to outline criteria to meet rigour in a qualitative research design by identifying research methods suggested by Sandelowski (1986) and Giorgi (1975). The chapter then addressed some ethical considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCE

Introduction

This chapter will present the participants' description of the divorce process. The analysis of the participants' descriptions has been modelled after Giorgi's (1975) discussion on data analysis. Initially, the participants' story of their parents' divorce was examined. These accounts were examined for similarities in experience. These similarities were then grouped into 12 common stages, or topical headings. These topics were then grouped into four comprehensive processes.

Using the Interview Guide (see Appendix C) to encourage the participants to discuss and explore their experience of parental divorce, the first set of interviews revealed a fairly comprehensive description of the divorce experience. This experience was then analyzed utilizing Giorgi's (1975) analysis process. This process entails identifying "meaning units", which are natural paragraphs that appear related to each other. These meaning units are then defined in terms of themes that seem to dominate each unit.

After examining the initial transcripts, 12 main themes or topics seemed to emerge as the most comprehensive description of the participants' experience. These topics are: the

experience of divorce, changing homes, altered finances, relationships between child and parent and child and siblings altered, ways of coping, family breakdown, view of world threatened, views on relationships, sense of family, gained maturity and insight, and the lessons learned.

The second interview then focused on identifying whether these topics were really descriptive of each participant's experience (see Appendix D). With each participant I explained the twelve topics outlined in Appendix D. Each participant then confirmed whether these were illustrative of her experience, or how they differed. Progressing step by step through each topic helped to generate more discussion around their experiences. Often this discussion confirmed the topics in Appendix D, and also helped to expand on each point. I found the process to be quite validating both for the participants and for myself. One participant commented that: "this is probably the first time I've ever really talked about [the divorce] with anybody as much, or well, anybody really, because we never talked about it." Another participant remarked "I think that's really good that you figured this out!"

I found that on the whole the participants agreed with the 12 topic areas. I also found that the participants were very keen to clearly articulate their experience, and if they felt that a word I had chosen to describe their experience was not quite right, such as the term jealousy, they were quick to point out this discrepancy. As well, some of the topics

simply did not describe all of the participants' experience. Most often this was due to differences in the physical environment of the child. As an example, for one participant the topic "stresses evoked by stepparents" did not apply as neither of her parents had dated other people. For another participant, her father and stepmother lived in a distant city.

Under each topic heading was included a list of themes which summarized all of the participants' stories (see Appendix D). Because of their specificity, many of these themes were not as descriptive of the experience for all the participants. However, as the 12 topics described the general experience of parental divorce they seemed to be more representative of the experience of all the participants.

In the second interview I also shared with the participants my perception of their story. I had developed several hypotheses from the first set of interviews which I felt added a new perspective to the participants' experience. These hunches centered on two main areas. First, I believed that the participants' experience was similar to one described by just world theory (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). The participants' perception of a just world had been threatened by their parents' divorce, and this perception often resulted in the participants having difficulty trusting others, and in an increased desire for control over their lives. Second, I felt that the divorce affected how they came to see their families. I was intrigued by how many participants seemed to have greater trouble accepting

the addition of stepparents and stepchildren to their home, than they did to the loss of one parent from their home.

In summary, the second set of interviews served to confirm the 12 topic areas I had identified from the first set of interviews, to add to or alter the meaning behind some of these topics, to explore my hunches about the meaning behind the experience, and to relate some of these findings to relevant literature.

The participants' experience of their parents' divorce seems to follow a progression. This progression becomes clear once the 12 topics are organized by their content into four categories, or processes. The participants, in response to the experience of divorce, moved through each process, and its completion seemed to precipitate movement on to the next process. It was, for the participants, a type of psychological journey. This journey then is the progression I witnessed, and it seems to be organized around four categories. Using the term process rather than category seems more precise however as within each category there is also movement, and a process is suggestive of movement.

The content of the 12 topics is such that they seem to fit within one of these four processes. The first topic, the immediate experience of the divorce, seemed to stand alone and was characterized by the participants' movement through the shock of the divorce, and the intense feelings the news often provoked. The second process included topics which described changes in the child's environment such as: stresses evoked by the introduction of stepparents, altered relationship between the child and parent and siblings, moving homes, altered finances, and their ways

of coping with these changes. These changes required the participant to make a cognitive adjustment and this adjustment process is described by another group of topical headings which have to do with how the participants came to perceive their changed world. These topics included: view of world threatened, family breakdown, and views on relationships. The last process dealt with topics that described the participants reframing the experience of divorce and eventually moving toward resolution of it. This process included the topics of, sense of family, lessons learned, and gained maturity and insights.

In summary, the participants in their own unique ways seem to have moved through: the raw feelings of learning about their parents' divorce, the physical changes the divorce entailed, cognitively adjusting to these changes, and finally beginning to reframe the experience in order to resolve and accept their new lives.

This chapter will describe this progression. Each of the four processes will be discussed in detail, using examples from the interviews with the participants to illustrate each process. The first process to be discussed is the immediate experience of the divorce.

The Immediate Experience of the Divorce

The immediate experience of the divorce is the participant's story of the divorce. Naturally, each story enjoys its own individual sense of narrative and meaning. However, the stories share similarities in terms of their plot and context. Each participant experienced the end of her parents' marriage, and experienced this change during either late childhood or early

adolescence. As the girls grew, they made sense of their experience in many similar ways.

Although there are many similarities in experience, there also appear to be several variables that intensified the uniqueness of the experience for each participant. These were the participants' interpretation and meaning assigned to the divorce process, the degree of trauma involved in the family prior to the divorce, during the divorce period, and in the post-divorce family, the age of the child, the family structure and dynamics and the coping mechanisms utilized by the child. These variables are a fundamental part of each child's experience, and so their effects will be evident throughout the following discussion.

To tell the story of the participants' experience of divorce I must start at the beginning. Nowhere did the experiences share more similarities than when the participants' learned of their parents' intention to separate. For all but one of the participants the reaction was one of shock, denial, sadness, and a curious and sometimes humorous pragmatism. One girl wanted to know who would do Dad's dishes, another worried about "well how are we going to have money?" As the girls recounted their story, they expressed some embarrassment at their practical concerns about how their household situation would be altered. For all of the girls except the one participant who did not express shock, denial, or practical concerns, these household changes meant that their father would no longer be living with them.

The girls who initially expressed practical concerns were

also the girls who did not, prior to the divorce, enjoy a close, emotional bond with their fathers. These fathers appeared to have engaged in traditional roles in their homes. These roles often meant that the men were absent much of the time from home pursuing demanding careers. Their role was one of material provider, while their wives assumed the primary parenting role. The girls' practical concerns then reflected their understanding of their parents' roles, and their fear of how change would affect these roles.

Girls who described feeling shock, or denial, were those girls whose fathers had assumed more than the provider role with their children. These girls looked to both of their parents for guidance and nurturance. Again, like the girls who expressed practical concerns, the initial reaction of these girls reflected their fears around the immediate changes in their household.

One girl was pleased by her mother's decision to leave her father. Her home prior to her parents' divorce was unlike any of the other participants. Her father was violent and abusive to her mother. She was afraid of her father, and had hoped that her parents' would divorce. For this girl, the loss of one parent meant she was leaving fear behind her, while for the other participants, the loss of one parent entailed moving toward the unknown.

Most of the participants were told they were going to have a family discussion, and this event usually caused the girls to feel apprehensive as family discussions were rare or

nonexistent and were not perceived to be a forum for good news. All but one of the participants have a vivid memory of learning of the news, and were able to describe where and when they were told, who they were with and how they reacted. For most of the participants, knowledge of the possibility of divorce made a difference as to how they reacted to the news. Several of the girls had witnessed fighting between their parents, and the issue of separation had been raised before, so that the shock of the news was lessened.

r: was the news a shock?

p: yeah it was something I sort of expected, cause there was a lot of fighting going on and I don't know. I didn't at the moment they told us, it was a big shock because I hadn't expected it, but the background was sort of pointing to it, I sort of expected it.

The one participant whose home had been violent had been actively pleading with her mother for several years to leave. The violence in her home had pushed her to the point where if her mother had not left, she felt that she would have.

p: It's not like I didn't want my parents to break up because when I was eleven I said, if you don't leave, because she was always wanting to leave, I said if you don't leave, I don't want to live here anymore.

This participant perceived divorce as a solution rather than a loss. As a result, her experience of the divorce differs dramatically from the other participants. However, her adjustment to her parents' divorce appears to follow the progression that the other participants experienced as well. This entailed adjusting to the environmental changes incurred by the divorce, coming to terms with her loss, and learning to accept the changes she had experienced.

For the other participants the experience of the divorce differed more by a matter of degree. For example, anticipating their parents' divorce seemed to help lessen the initial shock. Although some girls had anticipated their parents' intention to divorce, they were still surprised by their own intense reaction to the news.

p: I think it was S who said, I think Mum and Dad are going to get separated, and I said yeah, I think they are too, and you know it didn't upset me. I just thought it would happen, and when it did happen it was different, like oh my God this is happening to me.

Those who seemed to have the most difficulty coping with the news though were those who had either not anticipated the news or who had ignored the signs in the home that suggested their parents may split.

p: For such a long time you kind of really don't realize what's going on you know. There wasn't violent fights and they weren't throwing things at each other, it wasn't like that. It was all of a sudden this sadness in the family and you don't really know where it comes from because you always had family, there's been bad and good times too in our life but we've always been a family through it.

For two sisters, one of their most poignant memories of learning of the divorce was the knowledge that their father had broken his promise to never divorce.

p: I remember that I was just heart-broken when they separated because it's like he broke a promise, that was the most devastating thing.

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p: So I guess that's why it sort of surprised me at first, it's like but you promised you know, but that's just being a kid I guess that you sort of keep that in your head but it's always stuck with me, it's always stuck with me, just that one promise he made.

The metaphor of the broken promise is an apt description of much of the girls' experience during this period of their

lives. Feelings of abandonment, neglect, loneliness, and sadness were pervasive. The feeling of abandonment seemed to stem not so much from having one parent leave the home, although that did occur, but more from the loss of one or both parents who became overwhelmed emotionally by the experience.

p: Well it was difficult for the first two years. We lived with my Mum and she went into a really deep depression after and the fact that my Dad had had an affair didn't help anything. For the first two years she had to look after herself sort of thing, in a way I guess we were neglected. She had to look out for number one because I think it was so difficult for her to even get up and face the day.

For some of the girls, their parents were able to protect them from a sense of neglect and abandonment.

p: Yeah, I didn't feel as much of an abandonment or alone feeling because my parents were so overcareful to make sure that everybody was okay. There was never a feeling that they have left and don't care, you know it was more like they've left and they're caring too much or they're trying too hard.

Other participants sought to avoid the feeling of abandonment by attempting to control their world. One way of achieving this was by taking responsibility for the parent who had withdrawn. Many of the girls believed that they had at some time after the divorce "parented" one of their parents.

r: Did you feel a sense of abandonment as the parent you lived with withdrew?

p: I never felt abandoned. I just took responsibility again.

Another girl felt a sense of abandonment when she chose to side with her father after the divorce.

p: I felt like the odd one because I had chosen to be with Dad, I felt like I was punished, like I wasn't included with their [mother and sibling] own little jokes and that.

Another participant felt as if she had abandoned her

father.

p: I guess there are times when, I mean when they first got divorced I think I completely abandoned my Dad, especially when he probably needed it most.

It is easy to see from these accounts that the feeling of abandonment was interwoven into all of the participants' early reaction to their parents' divorce. The feelings were affected by the different perspectives of the girls, and consequently were shaped by the girls' interpretation of the event, and also by the dynamics of their home. Through my own work in counselling I have come to know that individuals fear abandonment at a very deep level of their being. All of the participants in this study experienced these feelings, and their influence is especially apparent throughout the stages of learning and acceptance.

The feelings of loss and confusion also describe the participants' experience, and these feelings generally persisted for some time after the divorce. For two sisters who came from a home which was markedly stable after the divorce, these feelings were not as descriptive. For the remainder of the participants however, loss and confusion were prominent issues for them, and for a few participants, remain so still.

The feelings of sadness and anger were pervasive, and in part can be traced to the participants' response to their sense of loss. A feeling of shock was also a common description used to describe their experience. One

participant who was slightly older than the other participants when the divorce first occurred described herself as feeling in shock for the first six months, and did not begin to experience her anger and sadness until after this time. Her family had tried to protect the children from much of the pain of their divorce, but as this girl noted, the tendency to protect seemed to extend the process of separation for her.

p: The hardest eight months probably happened about half a year after the separation, when things were started to be dealt with, we were in shock up 'til then, and then we got to deal with the actual issues.

The divorce process created many physical losses for the girls. Probably the greatest loss was losing one parent from the home.

r: How did you feel during this time?

p: Kind of torn, because I wanted to be with both of them, and yeah, it's upsetting.

The loss of one parent dramatically altered the dynamics of the home that the girls were accustomed to. The resulting home atmosphere often entailed additional losses for the girls. Financial difficulties often created the need to change homes, and this move sometimes resulted in changing schools. Both of these losses created a loss of stability and familiarity for the girls, and these losses were experienced as quite threatening. Interestingly, the family home was sometimes seen as representing such unhappy times that the move from it was welcomed.

p: When the house was finally sold we were kind of glad to be rid of that. We needed to kind of get rid of the old house, so I don't really miss that because by the end it represented more negative things than positive ones.

Another typical loss described by the participants was the loss of tradition in their family. Many families had traditions that were special to each family and that the girls cherished. In particular the traditions around Christmas were especially felt to have been destroyed by the divorce.

p: That was the hardest, Christmas, I grew to hate Christmas. I always used to love it, it would be my favourite time of year. Tradition, I was a very traditional person, everything had to be the same way, and it wasn't right because like you'd wake up for Christmas morning, and you know with Mum and Dad, and have your stockings and everything, and you'd have the December first dinner, and everything was tradition. So that blew tradition for me and when tradition was gone, I didn't have anything else because that was Christmas for me, it was family, and it was tradition.

The divorce also affected how the girls came to see their family; their view of what a family was. One participant describes how she feared that she may not be able to find happiness in her new home, that her understanding of what a family was did not match her present reality.

p: It was a happy, secure family with two parents and three kids and then that wasn't there anymore. . . I saw it as one unit and without it being one unit I didn't know if it could be true, if we could be happy.

Some of the girls took a long time to accept the resulting family they lived in, and in particular the new home that the non-custodial parent made, especially if there was a stepparent and or stepchildren involved. Although acceptance of their new family was slow to develop for many of the participants, their present sense of family seems to be allied to that of a divorced home. My hunch had been that the girls' feelings of loss around their split homes may have caused them to compare their homes to their friends from non-divorced

homes. This comparison, I had thought, could have created feelings of envy and a deeper sense of loss. Only one participant seemed to have experienced this, and her childhood was particularly unstable and traumatic. The other participants' experience was an interesting dichotomy. On the one hand, their lives in the post-divorce homes were seen as normal, while on the other hand none wanted this type of home for herself.

r: So your picture then of a normal family isn't necessarily that of a whole one?

p: Oh a normal family - well sure like with a Mum and the whole bit like "Leave it to Beaver". It's just that, I guess I didn't really know too many people like that.

r: So let's say then a divorced family such as the one that you grew up in, you could describe that as your normal picture of a family growing up.

p: No I wouldn't describe it as a normal picture.

r: I'm wondering then what did you compare it to?

p: I don't know if I even compared it. My Mum was just my family and she was just, you know, it was my family, it was my Mum. Whenever anyone would ask who my parents were I would say my Mum because I live with her and it wasn't until this year where I considered this (Dad's family) as my family too.

While most of the participants may have come to see the divorced home as the norm for their view of family, none wanted this type of home for their children, nor did any of them really want to fill of the role of stepparent.

p: Eventually I'm going to get married and that will be fine, but I won't ever have, I won't have kids until I'm sure of it, I wouldn't ever want to put my kids through that. But divorce happens, that's fine. But I still, if I don't have to I don't want to put somebody else through it.

All of the participants eventually came to accept the

dual homes that are typical of divorced families, though for some girls this acceptance took most of their adolescent years.

About half of the girls still feel that their pain associated with the divorce has not been fully healed.

p: Well I still have a lot of pain from the divorce and I feel there is a lot of very terrible situations.

One girl poignantly described how for her the divorce process had never really ended.

p: A lot of people think that divorce, well that's it, but it carries on, like the fights are still going on, and it's difficult. Well, they hate each other. It's hard.

For the rest of the participants however, living with the dual family typical of divorced homes has become the norm. Visiting one parent on weekends, having the option of another parent to live with, sharing their parents with stepparents and stepchildren, becoming accustomed to stepparents and having new brothers and sisters, living with the tensions between their parents, have all become part of their normal lives.

All of the girls believe now, several years after their parents' divorce, that the divorce was for the best. The commitment to this belief, however, varies in degree among the participants. While all may agree that it is better for their parents to live apart happily than together unhappily, some still wish that their parents had tried harder to live together happily. Three of the participants prefer their lives now, and believe that the divorce gave them a better life than they would have experienced without it.

p: I think it's for the best. I like the way our lives sort of turned out, how I've grown up now. I don't know how different it would have been if they'd been together. I mean they wouldn't have been communicating, they would have been fighting. My Mum probably wouldn't have been as happy and that would have affected me.

This difference in meaning around the divorce is illustrated best via the process of resolution. Some participants have moved through the three initial processes and have managed to resolve the divorce experience. Others are still working on resolving feelings of loss and injustice

While some of the participants have come to see their adolescent years in a divorced home as positive ones, without exception all participants described the divorce of their parents as a pervasive and lasting experience. This girl's comment is typical of the participants' perspective.

p: There's no place where it hasn't affected. I think everything has been. I think it affected everything in the end.

The Process of Adapting to Environmental Change

Environmental changes encompass a number of topics that all were based upon physical changes in the child's environment. These concrete changes, such as the loss of one parent from the family home, inclusion of stepparents into their lives, moving homes, and financial standing were generally followed by psychological change for the participant. Loss of one parent in the home was often followed by an altered relationship with one or both parents.

The addition of stepparents and stepchildren generally created a shift in the child's sense of family. Changing homes and a decrease in family income called for more adaptation for the child.

The environmental changes generally seemed to produce changes at a cognitive level as well. These cognitive changes will be explored in greater depth in the following process, the process of learning and growing. This portion will examine the participants' experience of environmental change and how they coped with these changes. There is a striking similarity of response among participants in this process. The differences seen here appear to be more a matter of degree. Possibly the initial responses to change in our environment is a shared human reaction. Most people tend to be uncomfortable with initial change in their lives. We differ later in our interpretation and adaptation to the event.

The two topics of environmental change which the participants spoke at greatest length about included how their relationship had changed with one or both of their parents, and how they felt about the addition of stepparents and stepchildren to their family. All participants agreed that their relationship with one parent became closer and warmer after their parents divorced. Which parent that was seemed to depend upon how the child viewed the family dynamics, the parents' personalities, and how responsibility was assigned for the divorce.

One participant, whose father was abusive and violent, chose to end all emotional ties with him and severely

restricted all other contact with him. This particular child was also the only participant who had no siblings, and consequently these two factors caused her experience to be quite different from the other participants. One of the most outstanding differences was the degree to which this young woman turned to her mother for support. For this participant, her mother was her only familial figure. As a result, she was very protective of her relationship with her mother, and deeply resented the intrusion of her mother's male companions. This girl's adjustment to her stepparent was marked with strife, anger and hurt as she sought to protect the one family relationship she had ever felt comfortable with, her relationship with her mother alone. Over eight years have passed since her parents' divorce, and as she remarks she still feels a great deal of pain around her relationship with her mother.

p: My Dad never upset me to make me cry, except when we first left him because I was scared. But he doesn't make me cry, or anything emotional, I mean, it's only, well, my Mum does. I could just bawl my eyes out when I think of things that have bothered me.

The majority of the girls felt that the divorce had spurred them to become closer to their fathers. Many of them described relationships prior to the divorce that portrayed their mother as their primary caretaker, and their father as a distant, important person too busy to spend time with his children. The divorce actually forced the fathers and their children to spend more time together, as most participants were expected to visit their fathers on the weekends. Some of

the participants initially fought this arrangement, saying it was too great a sacrifice of their time. All of these participants persisted however and now feel they have gained a closer, much warmer relationship with their fathers.

p: I think it (the relationship) has been altered and I think it's brought me closer to my Dad. . . Closer to my Dad because like I couldn't even remember him before. A relationship with Dad then, I don't think I really had one, you know five or ten minutes of talking then wasn't bad. But I don't remember having a really good relationship with him and now that I see him it's like I tell him everything I have to tell.

Another reaction described by some participants was feeling as if they had lost their relationship with one of their parents, or as if they had lost it temporarily. This loss seemed to stem from a number of causes, the most prominent ones being blaming one parent for causing the divorce and hurting the other parent, feeling one parent had become an angry and bitter person, or from a number of unspecified feelings of blame and anger.

p: I took a lot of her sadness, she vehicled her sadness at me a lot and that really affected our relationship. I ended up leaving and going to my Dad's because it just became very unreasonable, and that was the sad part, and the most traumatic part of this whole separation for me.

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p: After the divorce I got to be really close to my mother. I never really saw her as a person before that. It was my Dad and he was God and my Mum was just this little weakling who couldn't survive without him. . . I felt not that close with my Dad for a while, I guess I had a lot of anger against him.

Another relationship the majority of the participants felt was altered was their relationship with their siblings. By far the most common experience was one of growing closer to

their siblings. Many participants felt that their siblings acted as an interim family for them for a time, particularly when their parents had withdrawn within themselves. Most participants said they would have felt terribly lost without their siblings' support.

p: For my sisters and me we were very close. We almost walked around the house in groups. We used each other a lot in that way and that strength was really what we needed, and we depended on and really helped us out.

Another reaction is what I describe as forming enemy camps. In situations where one sibling sided with one parent, and the other siblings sided with the other parent, there evolved feelings of hostility and mistrust amongst the siblings.

p: She (Mum) could talk to me and I wanted her to be able to talk to me, where she couldn't talk to my sister. My sister and her have a lot of problems and she really got hurt. And so I have a lot of problems with that, a lot of feelings towards my sister too for the way she treated my mum, but it was my Dad's influence on her.

The introduction of stepparents to the participants' families created a lot of additional stresses for the girls. All but one participant had numerous stories to tell of some ignominious conduct they had witnessed being committed by their stepparents or parents' companions. Their feelings surrounding the addition of stepparents and stepchildren seemed to stem from feelings of jealousy, on the part of both the children and the stepparents. The feeling of jealousy seemed to be based upon two reactions. First, the children had rationalized their feelings of loss and abandonment from one parent leaving. They understood that the parent was leaving not them, but their spouse. However once one parent

began to devote time and energy to a new companion, this seems to have been interpreted as the final abandonment. In reality, the parents' companions did require much more of the parents' time, and it seems they were also often jealous of the time their new lover was devoting to their children. As one child commented,

p: She probably never would admit to it but she was jealous of us because she couldn't create a secluded little foursome, her two kids and my dad and her. It's still there, I remember my little sister, it really hurts her when they plan holidays just the four of them together.

Another girl describes how hurt she felt when her mother sided with her lover instead of with her.

p: So we all sat around the table, (and he said) if anyone's leaving this house it's going to be you, and my Mum didn't say anything, she just sat there and she never said anything. Her and I used to be close, really close, and it's kind of really put a wedge in there, it will probably take a while to get over.

Another girl felt that the addition of stepparents was the biggest change in the whole divorce process that she had to adapt to.

p: The divorce was a change but I think the biggest change for me wasn't the divorce it was the two years later when there was the stepparents, that was the most difficult part.

The other factor behind the children's feeling of jealousy seems to be based upon their psychological picture of their family. Part of this picture includes placing boundaries around what constitutes their idea of their family. Stepparents and stepchildren are an intrusion into this boundary. The participants seem to feel that it was one decision to let a parent leave from their family, but a very different one to allow people in. The girls naturally felt

that they should have some say in who would be part of their family. They felt, when their parents' companions moved in, as if their personal boundaries were being violated by the intrusion of strangers. This, to them, seemed to be the final affront to their sense of family, and they were not willing to give up this sense without a fight.

The addition of stepchildren and half-brothers and half-sisters really helped to illustrate the participants' reluctance in allowing new members into their families.

r: Can you describe your adjustment to accept stepbrothers and stepsisters, half-brothers and half-sisters?

p: Yeah, that was really hard, at first I refused to call - my sister. . . I found it difficult, but you know, with a - year old she was so excited. How do you explain (to people), because she never said stepsisters. Like, it is my Dad's wife's daughter. I couldn't accept that she was actually related to me.

Another participant describes how she keeps the boundaries around her own family through the titles she assigns to people.

r: It's important to you to keep those boundaries?

p: Yeah, I think so. I do, but like well I never tell anybody actually. I never refer to them as my stepbrothers or sisters, they're my Dad's girlfriend's kids, and I don't mind having my Dad's girlfriend's kids.

Once the participants gradually became accustomed to the reality of stepparents and stepchildren, they became more sanguine to the idea of expanding their picture of their family to include a few more. Most participants were more willing to include their new stepbrothers and stepsisters, and especially their half-brothers and half-sisters. The one participant who had no siblings genuinely loved her

half-brother and half-sister. The lone participant who readily accepted the addition of a stepmother also was very keen on the addition of stepchildren.

Moving homes is a big change for most people. For those participants who did move, and this described about 75% of the participants, it was one more stress in an already strained adolescence.

r: You changed homes a couple of times, was that very unsettling?

p: Very unsettling, it's amazing how much a house really represents to you, you know having your own place.

The split of their parents often meant that the participants now had the option of living with either parent. While this doesn't describe all the participants' experiences, some participants described this new option as giving them a type of bargaining power. When tensions rose in one home, the girls knew they were welcome at their other parents' home. This very real power altered the dynamics of their custodial home. Some girls felt that their parents tried to encourage them to stay by buying them things. The other alternative was for the custodial parent to call the girl's bluff, and this was experienced by some as hurtful, by others as expected.

r: The child for the first time has real bargaining power, do you know what I mean by that?

p: You mean that you can decide where you live and it often comes up and it does, it's like well if you don't do this for me I'll go live with Dad.

r: Right.

p: (laughing) It happens all the time.

The girls also described a type of holiday phenomenon

that occurred when visiting the non-custodial parent. When I used the somewhat ambiguous phrase of holiday phenomenon to describe this experience, the girls for whom this phrase fit understood what I meant by it immediately.

p: I was kind of rebelling against my Dad and I thought, oh, it will probably be better at Mum's because, it's a lot different when you visit than when you live with them, it's so different when you start to live with them.

Differences in financial status affected the holiday phenomenon. Life was more pleasant at the parent's home who could afford the finer things in life. This generally was the father's home, and while the girls were aware of this difference in financial status, none would have chosen to have lived with one parent on the basis of this inequity alone. The more typical reaction was probably one of resentment toward their fathers for not having financially supported their mothers more responsibly. But this resentment was surprisingly not very deeply rooted, and the girls were reluctant to describe their feelings as resentment.

Most of the participants described living a more frugal existence since the divorce, but their feeling around this change in their standard of living seemed to be a commitment to themselves to ensure that they would not be as financially dependent as their mothers, or admiration of their mothers for having coped as well as they had. Many of the girls felt that their mothers had been outstanding role models in their ability to provide financially for a family. The girls who felt that their mothers had suffered from being dependent were deeply committed to their own financial independence.

p: I guess I try hard and my goals are I will have a good job because I don't ever want to end up like my Mum, struggling for money and having to beg my Dad for money sometimes. I think that's so disgusting, I won't ever have to go through that.

Changing homes sometimes required changing schools, and this was experienced as even more threatening than changing homes. Fortunately only two of the participants were required to change schools because of the divorce. One of these however had to change schools many times, and as a result her grades were poor and she never completed Grade 12.

p: I wanted to have a great thing like that (school), but it never, it just seemed too hard once it all happened to just keep it going, like to keep going at it. It was just too hard to get back on track.

In summary, the girls adaptability to the many changes they endured as adolescents is remarkable. That these stresses arose during an already stressful time in their lives, adolescence, makes it particularly remarkable. There is an old saying that states that times change and we change with them, but as one participant commented, "there are only so many adjustments you can make at one time."

The Learning and Growing Process

Carl Jung once commented that "the growth of the mind is the widening of the range of consciousness, and . . . each step forward has been a most painful and laborious achievement" (1928, p. 340). The participants in this study made many steps forward in maturity and in their knowledge of life, but these steps were, for most of the

girls, a struggle. It was a struggle in that they endured a type of loss of innocence at an age earlier than most children undergo this transforming experience. Their world which had originally been for most, happy and safe, suddenly changed and was no longer the world of their childhood. The suddenness of this loss was for some the most difficult to resolve. Their worlds became confusing, their reality questionable, and life unpredictable. A few struggled with an almost Kafkaesque view of the world and this view took considerable emotional and cognitive energy to resolve.

Three central topics describe the learning and growing process that went on for the participants: coming to terms with losing the world they had known, how they made sense of it, and coming to terms with an intensified adolescence.

All but one girl lost a world that they had known and trusted. The exception was a participant whose world had been so frightening and unstable that leaving it was moving toward stability. Her experiences of the few years following her parents' divorce was a chaotic one because of her father's violent and unpredictable behaviour. Her father followed her mother and herself, wrecking their cars and homes and making threatening phone calls. She lived a hellish childhood and early adolescence, and only began to find a stable world in later adolescence. This stability was short-lived, however, as she felt that her mother's male companions intruded into this stability, and created another world of chaos for her. Understandably, this participant is still struggling with many issues. Recently, since she has begun to live on her own she

feels that she is now beginning to make the home for herself that she never had as a child, and is moving slowly toward resolution and growth.

This participant's experience was unlike any of the other participants, and her chaotic childhood provides an excellent basis of comparison of the other participants' experience. This participant commented that her own experience was probably easier to resolve than someone who had lost a stable and predictable world.

p: I would be totally shocked if I had a really happy life and then all of a sudden boom, your parents are divorced. Like you didn't know anything, that would probably even be harder. Well, it would probably be harder, if you think that you have the nice life and it just gets pulled away and you don't know why.

This girl has a profound knowledge of what life is like without stability, and is able to understand the effect of losing one's stability. All but two of the rest of the participants came to experience the loss of their stable world as well. The exception was two sisters who both felt that their world was relatively unaffected by the divorce. Their father was only somewhat more absent after the divorce than he had been when he lived with them, and otherwise their world remained about the same.

The rest of the participants interpreted the loss of the world they had known in similar ways. Many described feeling helpless and as if they suddenly had no control over their world. Others denied or repressed the feelings their situation created.

p: I guess that's what I did with the divorce, is that I shut myself out and I didn't want to hear about it, and I didn't want to believe that it was real.

Many of the participants have vivid memories of their realization that the world they had known was gone for them.

p: Our family was warm, caring, we had a really good time, it was fun being a kid, having that warmth, that's what family is. That warmth comes from a family and it's partly undecribable, it's like a warm rush over you, you know, and then when that is all of a sudden ended, you don't realize that it's ended. . . So it's scary when it breaks apart and it's threatening.

Parents who had had an affair, or whose behaviour the children considered questionable, was also seen as highly threatening.

p: I couldn't handle it, like Dad shouldn't be with her (stepmother), it was just, it was immoral. . . I didn't know what to think anymore. . . To me he had totally blown everything that I believed totally out of the water.

Three other participants suspected that their parents had had affairs prior to or during the divorce, and this knowledge seemed to be so threatening that I found the girls unwilling to discuss the subject. One girl, when I asked several times what the knowledge of her mother having had an affair would mean to her, answered by denying its possibility. I felt that the notion was too threatening for her to consider.

The girls who were willing to acknowledge their parents' affairs or intemperate behaviours found that they began to question their own belief systems. Logically, they thought, "my parents have told me behaviour such as this is wrong, yet they are engaged in it, so what is wrong?" This questioning period was a confusing time for them, and occurred during an already unstable period in their lives. All participants felt

that though this was a confusing, troubling time for them they now feel they have gained greater insight through its occurrence.

The majority of participants felt that they were not able to discuss their confusion and anger about the divorce with their parents or siblings. The participants described wanting to be able to discuss the divorce with their parents, and even being encouraged by their parents to do so, but then finding that it was too emotionally charged to talk about with them and that their parents were unable to achieve the impartiality they promised they could.

p: But we don't talk about it. I can't talk to my Mum because she hates my Dad so much, and I can't talk about it to my Dad because he hates my Mum so much.

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p: I mean I even felt it when I was in the house, that I couldn't say such and such a thing and I couldn't be my own person. I had to be this, you know, this little box (of guarded statements), yeah, and even though she tried and she would say to me, oh I really want you to be able to talk about - (stepmother) and I would, and she'd wince, or she'd be very silent. That was even harder because I'm very sensitive with her and you know body movement, I know my Mum right, even though she's quiet she tenses up and I can't talk about it.

Many of the participants described feeling very alone and confused during this period because of their discomfort talking to their parents about the divorce. As well, one participant said that these interviews with me were the first time she had ever really talked about the divorce. Another girl said she did not think she had any insights to offer on the subject, and at the end of the interview remarked how surprised she was at how much she had had to say.

The participants worked at making sense of the divorce in

a number of ways. One participant accepted her father's choice to leave soon after it happened, and through her acceptance feels she has avoided much of the pain her sister endured. Other participants clung to their feelings of anger and sadness for years, and still hold feelings of blame toward one parent and feelings of abandonment.

Another common theme shared by most participants is difficulty trusting people. I was surprised at how consistent this theme was among the participants, and how these participants consistently traced its occurrence to having experienced divorce in their home.

p: I guess I don't trust people because I counted on my parents and then they divorced. They were people I counted on sort of and then they were so busy looking after their concerns that I felt like they had left, and I trusted them to be there. That's more why I wouldn't trust them, everybody that I counted on had sort of gone.

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p: Whereas it's taught me to sort of not trust anything, like I'm really afraid of getting into a relationship.

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p: I have a hard time trusting people, but even with my roommate like we're really close and I talk to her now but it took me a long time before I got close because everytime something always happened. . . I don't think I'm not ever going to be able to trust anybody, which I can, I mean I can trust people, it just takes me a little, a little gradual, I go slower.

These girls all say that they do not trust like their friends from non-divorced homes do. They feel more worldly, cautious, and feel that they have experienced more pain than their friends.

p: Inside a lot of me sort of looks at the world as sort of gray, and there are things that kids haven't experienced like I have. They think everything is wonderful out there and nothing can hurt, and inside I know that's not true.

Most of the participants see their world as an unpredictable place. This seems to be the result of their perception that people are not always trustworthy and that one's world can change overnight.

One participant does not seem as committed to this view. This participant was probably the one participant who enjoyed the greatest security and was the most protected throughout her parents' divorce. This is also the one participant who did not feel that she was more mature or worldly than her friends. This difference suggests that the divorce did not provoke the same degree of emotional growth within her that the other participants described as having occurred for them.

This particular participant's sense of stability seems to have stemmed from a number of causes. Both this participant and her sister felt that their mother had been able to create a loving, happy home for them both before and after the divorce. Their mother had been the adult responsible for parenting in their home, while their father had been often absent or less involved in parenting. The loss of their father from their home consequently was not perceived as a devastating loss. As well, the divorce seemed to have spurred the father to become more involved with his children. In a sense the divorce created for the sisters the gain of their father as opposed to his loss.

This participant was also the middle child, and felt that she was protected and supported by both her older sister and her mother. Her older sister seemed much more aware of the pain her mother had suffered through the divorce, and aware of her own feelings. It was as if the older sister had been on the front line of the divorce, while the younger participant had enjoyed a greater degree of shelter from the emotional strain created by the divorce. Still, it was my hunch that this younger participant had avoided thoroughly exploring her feelings around the divorce, and tended to try to only see the positive side of the divorce. I was unsuccessful in encouraging her to explore the possibility of the existence of some ambivalent feelings

For the other participants though, the world came to be seen as an unpredictable place. Interpreting their world in this way, and feeling as if they had little control over it caused many of the participants to question their sense of reality.

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p: My memories of my family like when I was five is strong and positive and so when that's threatened all of a sudden there is a lot of doubt and you don't know what is true and what's not true . . . So it's scary when it breaks apart and it's threatening and you don't know if it was true or if it wasn't true.

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p: Just that everything's not predictable, like I fought it for a long time and I didn't want to accept it, I didn't feel comfortable with it.

Seeing the world as an unpredictable place also affected the girls' views on their own relationships. Most felt they

had difficulty trusting relationships and were frightened of divorce occurring in their lives also.

p: Our relationships and how we view relationships has to alter because we saw a relationship working, and not working or never working or whatever, and so when you see your parents, the one thing that's supposed to be stable, not working then there's a lot of doubt that it ever can. So, if after twenty years their's can't work is there ever going to be a right person you know.

It is perhaps because they felt life was so unpredictable that the need to feel in control was so important an issue for every participant. All the participants said that it was important for them to feel in control, and many said that their friends called them bossy.

p: Control is important and I've always fought for it, like my independence, where I want control over my life and I guess it has been a big thing that I like to be in charge. People tell me I'm bossy but I always like to be in charge so that nothing is going to go wrong.

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p: Oh yeah, I always have to be in control, I don't like feeling helpless.

r: So much in control, you want to feel control over how your Mum feels, you want to protect her?

p: I would take responsibility for everything and everybody if I could, you know.

This need to control manifested itself in the participants' relationships. In particular the girls described feeling insecure in male/female relationships.

p: You can't even control your husband, who is supposed to be with you the rest of your life, he could go out and have an affair, and you know, I hate that feeling. It is just an awful feeling of betrayal and rejection, it's just something that I remember talking to you about. It is something that is really big for me in life, and I have a real hard time coping with that.

This need to feel in control leads to an interesting dichotomy for the girls. On the one hand, they recognize the need to be flexible in an unpredictable world. On the other hand, they have found that the need to feel in control protects them from facing an otherwise threatening view of the world. How to resolve this dichotomy has been the focus of many of these girls adolescent years, and will be examined in the following process of resolution. I think it important to note though that these girls have been struggling with issues that many individuals do not explore until later in life.

Another issue which was raised by many participants was how they felt that the normal developmental pattern of adolescence had been in many ways intensified. It was like, in a sense, experiencing adolescence exponentially. Many of the participants described engaging in rebellious behaviour for a few years after the divorce, growing more independent from their parents, feeling confused over their parents' fallibility, and turning more to their friends for companionship. None of the girls were really sure though whether this was simply a normal part of their adolescence, or whether the divorce precipitated more pronounced adolescent behaviours, such as rebellion. Some suspected that the latter case was more correct.

p: Yeah, but it seemed to be worse, like to a worse degree than normal adolescence. Like you look at other kids in normal homes, they were rebellious but not quite to that extent, whereas well we went through years where you got up in the morning, there was a fight about what time you got up; what's for breakfast, there was a fight about what we could eat; about getting dressed, what you were wearing, how long you took in the shower.

Adolescence can be described as a period in youngster's lives where separation and disengagement from their parents is a central concern for them (Rice, 1981). Divorce has a tremendous effect upon this separation process, I believe, because it precipitates the separation process at an unnatural rate for the adolescent child. Most children enjoy the opportunity to disengage emotionally and physically from their parents at a rate which coincides with their maturational development. The participants in this study described how the physical separation from one parent could affect their sense of security and cause an unnatural and premature separation between themselves and one or both of their parents.

p: I think that's when they need it (family) the most. I think that was the time when I probably needed a mother the most. Although I wanted to separate from my family then but you need to know it's there, you need to know that that base is there and that you can separate from it, when somebody suddenly says but the base is no longer there. Then you don't know what to sort of step off from and without a stair you can't climb upwards.

Many of the participants felt that they grew up too quickly, and that they lost having a parent to nurture them and give them direction sooner than they would have normally.

p: I felt like a whole big thing had been dropped on me and I had to deal with it then real quick, and I think it had a lot to do with it. I sort of resent that, the fact that I had to grow up quicker.

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p: It's hard to balance, I mean even now I don't want to, I half want her to treat me like an adult, and treat me like a little kid, you know like to be there and mother me as well as I want her to respect me and know that no it's not Dad who's brainwashing me.

p: I think that it just happened that I was at the right age and I needed my Mum at that age because I needed to pull away from her.

I believe that children from divorced homes lose their innocence sooner than most children. I think this is illustrated by the insight these girls have shown in their relationships with their parents, and from their own emotional growth. In the next process, the process of resolution, it is interesting to see how the girls undergo a psychological journey which alters their perception of life. Authors such as Blake and Dickens would argue that to fall from innocence, though painful, is preferable to ignorance of experience. It seems that these girls would also agree with this philosophy.

The Process of Restructuring Meaning and Moving Toward Resolution

The experience of parental divorce is described by the participants as an intense and pervasive experience. The intensity of the experience naturally fades with time. The pervasiveness of the experience however manifests itself in more lasting ways. In particular, the experience of the divorce ultimately affects how the individual comes to construe his or her world.

George Kelly describes how perception and reality are shaped by how the individual represents them. Individuals have a "creative capacity . . . to represent the environment, not merely to respond to it. Because [people] can represent

[their] environment, [they] can place alternative constructions upon it and, indeed, do something about it if it doesn't suit [them] (cited in Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1980; p. 136). The participants in this study responded initially in many similar ways to their parents' divorce and the physical changes the divorce entailed. These similarities suggest that generally the participants construed and responded to their worlds in a similar pattern.

Following the initial experience of the divorce, adjusting to the physical changes the divorce entailed seems to have required an internal adjustment process as well. This period of adjustment and the process of learning and growing was described by the girls as they each began to experience and interpret their world differently after their parents' divorce. The trauma of the divorce appears to have precipitated several shared ways of perceiving their world. They now found it difficult to trust and to feel an increased need for a sense of control. The awareness of the premature separation from their parents was also intensified.

Kelly (Ivey & Simek-Downing, 1980) argues that individuals can alter their representation of their world when an older construction of their world is an impediment and/or may no longer fit their perspective. Sherman and Fredman (1986) describe the process of reframing meaning which is a counselling technique drawn from Adlerian theory. It "consists of changing the frame of reference against which a given event is considered or judged,

thus changing the meaning and value judgement of the event without changing the facts" (p. 196). I believe that the participants in this study were spurred to reframe, or restructure, many of the ways they perceived their world. This process is a lengthy one, and was one which was precipitated by the experience of and adjustment to the divorce, and resulted in some shared ways of perceiving the world.

Ultimately some of the fears which the divorce seemed to foster within the participants, such as fears around relationships and fear of a suddenly changing world, became cumbersome. To leave these fears behind required the participants to perceive their world in a different and often more positive way. This change in perception constituted, I believe, a restructuring of meaning. Often this reframing process has led toward resolution of the divorce, and I believe a greater acceptance by the participants of themselves.

A generalized feeling of instability, which was described by many of the participants, is the best illustration of this process of restructuring meaning. This feeling of instability, I believe, was caused by the meaning the girls gave to many aspects of their lives. For example, many of the participants, after the divorce, came to see their world as no longer predictable, fair or just. As a result, they described have difficulty trusting people, and desired a high degree of control in their lives.

This sense of instability appears to have served as a motivating factor to understand and ultimately resolve these tensions in their lives. The desire to understand was consistently described by the participants.

p: That's probably why I rebelled and probably why I got upset and because I just couldn't understand her anymore, she kept doing this and I don't know, I don't know.

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p: I was very confused again and upset. I didn't realize why, because like she didn't say why or anything.

r: "Why" was important to you?

p: Yeah, I didn't know what was going on.

r: So it was important for you to be able to predict what was going to happen?

p: Yeah, and the reasons why and stuff.

Understanding why they felt the way that they did seemed to be a way to overcome their sense of powerlessness and a way of making sense of this confusing time in their lives. Initially, the girls turned to their parents for answers, but felt uncomfortable talking to their parents about the divorce. Not being able to find their answers through their parents, it seems that they looked within themselves to provide their own answers.

One participant described how she felt that her need to understand what had happened to her was increased by the developmental stage she was at.

p: Adolescence is a kind of thirst to learn, a thirst to explore, and when that happens at the same time as divorce, it's kind of forced. So you are forced to doubt things, forced to relook at situations and readapt to life in a different perspective. So the world isn't just your house, your family, your dog, your two cars and your computer.

The evidence in this study suggests that the participants desire for control in their lives has been a way of defending themselves against their perception that the world was unpredictable. As they saw it, relationships could suddenly fail and the world could suddenly alter. As the participants gradually gained insight into their way of construing their world, they were then able to begin see their world differently. The participants gradually began to give up their deep-seated need for control. One participant describes how this shift occurred for her.

p: Like things had to be predictable, things had to be a certain way, and this is how they are supposed to be, this is how they morally are, and you know, it's not acceptable. But life's not like that.

r: You've let go now?

p: Well yeah, that's the whole thing is letting go.

r: Is that still kind of scary for you?

p: Oh yeah, sure it's scary, life's scary but you have to sort of get on with it. I don't know, I feel a lot more freedom now because I don't feel the load.

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r: So you kept making your own life very stable and predictable?

p: Yeah, I made my life predictable but I realized that I didn't necessarily like it (laugh).

This participant described how she caused her life to be very orderly and predictable for the first three years following her parents' divorce. She described herself as very dependable and responsible and structured.

p: [They saw me as] very responsible, you know, logical and that I clung on to. I saw them thinking that. I actually thought that was positive, then I realized that I had been running around for three years. I had my first car when I was fifteen before I even had my license you know and a bank loan, and I've already paid off my bank loan, and I've had a car totalled. All of these things, whenever they're not there I just rebuild a new responsibility.

This participant described feeling quite frightened once she began to let go of her need for control.

p: When I first figured out that's what it was (need to control), I collapsed. That was two weeks ago. I just, I really broke down and didn't know what I had to motivate me or to hang onto and then I realized that I should probably learn how to go through life and be happy without having to cling to something. My motivations were wrong.

This shift in perspective helped the participants to see their world and their parents in a new way. They began to feel more internally stable, and began to stop searching for external ways to feel in control and to reduce their tension.

r: You were trying to impose your own reality on the rest of the world?

p: Yeah, and I realized that the rest of the world was motivating me to do it, and not myself. So now what I want to do, in my big lesson that I've learned, when I do something I want the motivation to come within myself and not through stress of parents or stress of what other people see me as.

I believe that this new sense of security has allowed the participants to begin to accept the world as an unpredictable place and feel strong enough to find a balance between flexibility and taking control.

p: Just because I always had to have control, it didn't matter if I was usually insecure. I wouldn't let myself lose control. I think I have really let go of that, and just let things, I still feel that I'm in control enough to let myself feel the insecurity of not having predictability. I think I am strong enough as a person not to have to have that.

It appears that participants are beginning to reframe their perceptions of relationships as well. Relationships, for the participants, have typically been an area of concern because of the need to trust and feel in control. Some participants though have described how they are beginning to see this differently as well.

p: I would say they (relationships) change, but I hopefully, when I get into a relationship it will be strong enough that we can face the changes together.

Many of the participants feel that they have gained greater maturity as a result of their parents' divorce. Many feel that they are more mature in some ways than their friends from non-divorced homes. All of the girls value this maturity, and are proud of their independence. It seems that they have come to see experience, even painful experience, as synonymous with personal growth, and from this knowledge feel they have the strength to face life honestly.

p: I'm just so much more in touch with myself and how I feel and that is very positive to come out of such a negative situation. Because now that the divorce is over and now that my life is going to begin I'm starting with a greater knowledge of myself. So I sort of am starting from a vantage point where hopefully through situations I'll know a little bit more about myself and know how I'll react.

Out of this reframing process has developed a greater sense of acceptance for the participants for themselves, their environment and their family. Naturally, this process will vary in degree for each participant. Half of the participants believe that the pain of their parents' divorce, and the issues it has created, have not been fully resolved yet. These participants are still struggling with the issues the

divorce created, such as their ambivalent feelings toward parents and stepparents, difficulty trusting people, and sadness over their losses. To resolve these conflicts requires the participants to have acknowledged their feelings around the divorce, and to have actively explored and questioned their beliefs and assumptions. Some participants seem stuck in their hurtful feelings, others have not yet begun to question some of their assumptions, such as the issue of trust.

One participant does not describe herself as feeling that she has a strong need to feel in control nor does she have difficulty trusting people. This participant is the participant who was protected from much of the pain of the divorce by her older sister and her mother. My suspicion is that she has not really begun to face some her fears and concerns around her parents' divorce. This participant was described by herself and by her sister as being very secretive, and cautious about to whom she told details of her life. I asked her if this may be due to some difficulty she has trusting people, but she did not perceive her secretiveness in this manner. It may be that for this particular participant the processes of learning, growing, and restructuring meaning do not apply. This participant describes herself as having accepted her parents' divorce soon after its occurrence. This certainly is her current reality, and consequently the acceptance process has not been the struggle for her that it has been for the others.

Other participants appear to have resolved the losses and issues created by the divorce sooner than some of the other participants. Unlike the participant I have just described, I believe these other participants have moved more quickly, or more completely, through the process of experiencing the emotions their parents' divorce provoked within them, struggling with an altered reality, and have now managed to resolve these changes in their lives. For one participant this seems particularly true. I believe this is so because this participant watched her older sister struggle with many of the concerns and fears I have described. Her sister questioned what was right, withdrew from her father, had a deep need for control, and was cautious trusting people. This participant has now begun to accept her parents' divorce, and resolve these issues, but she has worked very hard to reach this stage. As a result of her obvious struggle, it appears that her younger sister has benefited, and has been able to reframe the meaning she has assigned to aspects of her parents' divorce much more quickly than her sister was able to.

In summary, each participants' progression from the divorce experience to resolution of this experience has varied in its degree of fulfillment and its degree of intensity. These differences are to be expected. However, the evidence suggests that there exists for all of the participants a natural cycle of progression from the initial experience of their parents' divorce, to experience of the physical changes

the divorce created, responding cognitively to these changes, and eventually coming to interpret the divorce in such a way that they accept the changes it created in their lives. I believe I would not have witnessed this cycle if I had interviewed participants who had recently experienced their parents' divorce. The participants in this study have had several years to reflect upon and to respond to their parents' divorce. I feel quite privileged to have been able to, at least vicariously, witness their growth and maturity.

Summary

In summary, this chapter has described the participants' experience of their parents' divorce. Four processes were identified that were descriptive of the nature of the experience and of the twelve topic areas which had been identified from the first interviews. These processes were the immediate experience of the divorce, the process of adapting to the environmental changes that the divorce created, the process of making sense of these changes and identifying the new meaning life had assumed for the participants, and finally reinterpreting this meaning through the process of resolution.

CHAPTER FIVE

COMPARISON OF PRESENT STUDY WITH RESEARCH

Introduction

The previous chapter presented the participants' experience of their parents' divorce. This chapter will examine this experience in relation to the literature discussed in the second chapter. As the literature suggested, little research has been conducted on the adolescent's experience of parental divorce. This chapter will compare the present study with pertinent research findings on the topic of children's experience of parental divorce.

A phenomenological study is designed to capture the richness and authenticity of individuals' experience (Giorgi, 1985). Giorgi (1975) suggests that this experience is well-suited to analysis on two levels. First, "by trying to understand the world of the individual" (p. 97), and secondly, by relating the experience to research. This second approach allows the researcher to interpret the findings from a new perspective. Sullivan (1984) argues that this interpretation helps us to gain greater insight into the experience being studied.

This chapter explores participants' experiences by relating it to other findings. Some theories, such as just world theory and attribution theory, help to provide new insight into the experience of divorce and help to reframe those aspects of the participants' experience that are suited to this.

Chapter four describes the participants' experience of divorce as a progression through four processes, or categories. The first process was the immediate experience of divorce, followed by the process of adapting to environmental change, the learning and growing process, and the process of restructuring meaning and moving toward resolution of the divorce experience. The term process was chosen because within each category participants moved from beginning to end. It was also noted that while this progression appears descriptive for all of the participants, the intensity of the experience and speed at which the participants moved through the four processes varied.

Research on children from divorced homes also describes the divorce experience as a progression through time with different stages characterizing this movement. Schwartzberg (1981) describes attachment theory as a way to conceptualize the divorce process for children. "Attachment theory provides a theoretical framework in which to view divorce as both a process extending over time as well as involving specific tasks related to the task of working through the experience of loss" (p. 125). There are four phases which describe the reaction to the separation process: denial, protest, despair, and detachment (Schwartzberg, 1981). It appears that attachment theory as a description of resolving loss shares some similarities with the participants' experience in the present study. Their progression involved resolving the initial loss of their parents' marriage and numerous other

losses the divorce precipitated. The process of resolving these losses did entail specific tasks as well.

The present study differs from attachment theory in its theoretical framework. The evidence in this study suggests that the phases Schwartzberg (1981) describes of denial, protest, despair, and detachment are more descriptive of the participants' responses to the changes they underwent within each of the processes this study describes. In particular, participants seem to have undergone the phases described by Schwartzberg during the process of environmental change. Each change the participants underwent, such as the loss of the parent from the home, altered financial status, moving homes and schools, stepparents and stepchildren, was often experienced in terms of denial, protest, despair and detachment. However, as a framework for the long-term process of adapting to the divorce, Schwartzberg's stages are not completely descriptive of the participants' experience.

In the first process, the immediate experience of divorce, the participants undergo a number of intense feelings in response to their parents' divorce. The actual experience of these feelings would seem to be crucial, as Schwartzberg believes, to the task of resolving their loss. The range of emotions described by the participants however, such as shock, fearfulness, disillusionment, abandonment, loneliness, sadness, and anger, do not seem to describe the reaction of denial which Schwartzberg argues is descriptive of this initial stage. Their memory for how they felt is still clear and lucid.

Denial of the intensity of their pain seems only to describe the experience for two sisters, and denial of strong feeling seemed to be a family value for them. Detachment, the last stage described by Schartzberg, is probably more characteristic of how the participants responded than is denial of the event or of the feelings the event evoked.

Protest (Schwartzberg, 1981) best describes aspects of the process of adapting to environmental changes and the learning and growing process, but does not accurately characterize a particular process. For example, some participants described experiencing an intensified sense of adolescence. They believed that they were more rebellious than their friends from non-divorced homes and more insistent upon their need for independence. This could be described as a type of protest, or as a way of venting their anger around the many demands the divorce made upon them. However the participants' responses to these demands were fairly complex. While protest is probably characteristic of the participants' initial responses to the changes the divorce created, it was not a long-term response that could describe a particular stage in their lives.

Despair also did not characterize a particular stage for the participants, although it could describe how some of the participants felt throughout the first three processes. The feeling of despair could have been evoked by the sense of helplessness many participants described and by their fear that they could not control aspects of their world.

Participants also described feeling confused and unsure of what moral framework they should abide by as they were confused by their parents' behaviours.

Detachment also is probably a better description of some of the participants' manner of dealing with the intensity of their feelings, rather than how they finally resolved the losses created by the divorce. This study suggests that the term acceptance, rather than detachment, is probably a more precise description of the participants' experience several years after the divorce.

Hetherington's (1979) crisis model arguably is a fairly accurate description of the participants' short-term reaction to the divorce. She suggests that first children must react to the immediate physical changes in their environment, such as the loss of one parent, the resulting family dynamics, and the parent-child relationship changes. Hetherington suggests that the stresses associated with conflict, loss, change and uncertainty are descriptive of the predivorce and separation stage. These stresses seem to be an accurate summation of the participants' reaction over the first year. However, the literature has not concentrated on a model that is descriptive of the long-term healing process, one which includes the growth and acceptance process that I witnessed.

The Immediate Experience of Divorce

Chapter four summarizes 12 topics that are descriptive of the participants' experience of parental divorce. These topics were then organized into four processes that described a movement from the initial experience of the divorce through to acceptance of the divorce. The first process is the participants' initial experience of their parents' divorce. The participants described this period as one rife with strong emotions. The girls reported feeling shocked, sad, worried over practicalities, abandoned and alone. One participant described feeling relieved. The divorce altered the participants' sense of family, and this change created additional losses for the girls, such as family traditions.

To compare the findings of this study with related literature presents several difficulties. First, this was a qualitative study that sought to illustrate the experience of divorce, and as a result comparisons between this study and quantitative research should be made cautiously. Second, Wallerstein (1985) and Santrock (1987) both observe that there has been little research conducted on children's reactions to their parents' divorce. Santrock (1987), in particular notes that research is particularly lacking in empirical studies on the adolescent experience of parental divorce. This paucity of research is one of the reasons an adolescent population was chosen for this study and why this study has focused on the

experience of parental divorce, as opposed to testing existing theory on the topic.

There are several studies, however, that have in part employed a qualitative research design to study the child's experience of parental divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Wallerstein, 1985; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) work is especially pertinent to the present study as it also looks at the adolescent experience.

In a study of such a broad nature as the present one, and in other related research there are few descriptive statements that can be made of all the participants. Hetherington (1979) notes that there is a "wide variability in the quality and intensity of responses and in the adaptation of children to divorce" (p. 852). One common response made though by participants in all these studies is "almost all children experience the transition of divorce as painful" (Hetherington, 1979, p. 851). All of the participants described the divorce as painful, even the one participant who wanted her mother to leave her father.

The present study's findings concur in part with several universal responses to parental divorce described by Wallerstein (1985). Wallerstein's study found children and adolescents tended to experience feelings of "anxiety, depression, [and] worry over one or both parents . . . (p. 546).

The feeling of anxiety, I believe, was experienced by

all the participants, though the source and intensity of the anxiety varied among participants. None of the participants used depression to describe their experience of the divorce, but all the participants used sadness to describe how they had felt about the divorce. Some felt that they were depressed during their adolescence, but were reluctant to trace its origins to the divorce. A number of the participants were depressed before and for some time after the divorce. The term depression carries a clinical tone to it that the participants, I think, may have been intimidated by, and may have feared that the consequences of being depressed were more serious than the consequences of feeling sad. A sense of pervasive sadness, however, does seem to describe the participants' experience, and seems to have stemmed from the many losses the divorce created and an increased sense of instability.

All of the participants expressed worry over one or both of their parents. The causes of the worry which seemed to have the most profound effect on the participants was their tendency to want to protect their parents from feeling hurt. In particular, loyalty conflicts were a major concern for the participants, especially conflicts such as deciding whose home to live in, and which parent to side with.

Another universal response described by Wallerstein (1985) is children's and adolescents' desire to undo the divorce. This seems to describe most of the participants, particularly those who were surprised by the news or were pre-teens when they learned of the news. One participant

described her sadness around her belief that her parents did not work hard enough at resolving their differences. She believed their marriage could have worked if only they had tried harder. This belief deepened this participant's sadness as she thought her parents' actions were somewhat capricious. She certainly harboured a deep-seated desire to undo her parents' divorce.

A universal response which this study noted was the participants' immediate concerns with pragmatic problems such as financial or housekeeping concerns. Feelings of shock and betrayal were also common responses particularly among participants who had not anticipated their parents divorce. One participant described feeling shocked even though her parents had often fought prior to their divorce. She believed she had protected herself by avoiding facing the possible consequences of her parents' fighting. Divorce, she thought, happens to other people, but not to her.

Hetherington (1979) describes young children feeling abandoned by one parent, and fearful that the other parent may leave them also. Interestingly, abandonment appears to be an issue with adolescents as well. Young children reason if one parent left, so could the other. While adolescents are able to reason more rationally, many of them described experiencing feelings of abandonment. This feeling seems to have developed from several sources. Some participants described a vicarious feeling of abandonment when one parent, usually their father, left home. Other

participants described feeling rejected and abandoned when one or both of their parents shifted their allegiances to their new spouses or companions.

Parental divorce creates numerous losses for the children involved. Many of the issues the children struggle with are the result of some loss they have experienced. Some losses the participants described being keenly aware of soon after the divorce was the loss of traditions in the home, and the loss of their sense of family. It is sadly ironic that many participants' need for tradition was probably increased by the divorce, while the resulting interim family after the divorce was by necessity very nontraditional. The participants wanted their world to remain predictable and similar to the world they had known. However, changes to the family seemed to dictate that traditions must alter, and maintaining many family traditions contained too many painful memories for the parents to persist in them. The following participant's impressions of Christmas were fairly typical of the other participants' feelings:

p: I grew to hate Christmas. I always used to love it, it would be my favourite time of year. . . So that [the divorce] blew tradition for me and when tradition was gone, I didn't have anything else because that was Christmas for me, it was family, and it was tradition.

The participants' sense of family was also affected by the divorce. Its effects will be discussed in the following process of adapting to environmental changes. Accepting the many changes to the family which the divorce created was a tremendous strain on many of the participants. Other issues

also developed out of the initial experience of divorce, and these issues are evident in the following processes. In particular, participants described trying to avoid their original feelings of abandonment and the frightening sense that their world was an unpredictable place by trying to over-control their lives and relationships.

In summary, the participants' immediate reaction to the divorce was one of intense emotions created by the shock of the news and by the many losses the divorce precipitated.

The Process of Adapting to Environmental Change

Chapter four described a number of environmental changes children generally experience after their parents' divorce. These changes are numerous and are often followed by an internal shift in perspective by the children in order to adapt to these changes. These changes are often perceived as losses. The changes most often spoke about by the participants were: the loss of one parent from their home, the inclusion of stepparents and stepchildren into their lives, moving homes, and decreased financial support. These concrete changes often precipitated psychological change for the participants. The loss of one parent from the home often led to changes in their relationship with one or both parents, and fostered increased closeness with their siblings. The inclusion of stepparents and stepchildren led to a shift in their sense of family. The double parental homes typical of divorced families created some interesting options for the participants, and decreased financial standing also created the need for more adaptation. These changes generally produced conceptual changes as well, and these changes will be discussed in the following process of learning and growing.

Research on children's experience of parental divorce also refers to the many environmental changes children encounter. These changes, or stresses as the literature refers to them, were perceived by the participants as a fundamental part of their experience and acted as the impetus for psychological

exploration and growth. Rutter (1978, in Forehand, Middleton & Long, 1987), has suggested that:

children who experience stress from several sources (e.g., divorce) are not at significant risk for adjustment difficulties. However, for those children who experience stress from several sources (e.g., divorce coupled with a poor relationship with both parents), the adverse effects may increase as a function of the number of stressors. (p. 306)

One participant mentioned that she felt that she could not have coped with any more change in her life than she had already experienced. This girl had experienced both parental divorce and her relationship with one parent had degenerated. When I asked her how she would feel about the addition of stepparents to her life, she said that would have entailed too many changes in her life in too short a period of time.

p: That would be a tremendous adjustment, I think I'm probably pretty lucky that it didn't all pile up at once.

Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1985), also comment on the numerous environmental changes children experience through divorce.

Some of the factors that mediate the long-term outcomes of divorce for children and parents appear to be the multiple life changes encountered following divorce. These include changes in economic status, residence, occupation, child care arrangements, social relationships support networks, family relationships, and physical and mental health. (p. 519)

The participants in this study however seem particularly flexible with physical changes in their environment. Only one participant felt deeply affected by numerous changes in her residence, economic status, and schools, and this participant was forced to move over a dozen times throughout her adolescence. For the other participants, the external changes

that seemed to create the greatest emotional hardship for them were the social changes. The girls felt they had most difficulty adjusting to new stepparents, and to the changes in their relationships with their parents. These stresses, I believe, presented the greatest risk for adjustment.

Forehand, Middleton, and Long, (1987) believe that a supportive environment is essential for healthy emotional growth for adolescents:

Studies have found that a supportive harmonious environment provides a setting for adolescents to recover from their stresses of daily life. Two factors that disrupt this are divorce and a poor parent-adolescent relationship, and have been associated with maladaptive functioning. (p. 305).

A supportive, harmonious environment does encourage the healing process. However, this environment is still readily found in divorced homes, as several of the participants noted. The probability of its occurrence however is affected by the great many additional stresses parents are enduring. Also, the participants who felt that they had grown into happy, well-functioning individuals enjoyed a supportive, harmonious environment in both parents' homes after the divorce, and had enjoyed a supportive environment in their home prior to the divorce. Only two sisters from the same home felt that this was descriptive for them.

The loss of one parent from the home altered the existing dynamics in the home. One way in which these dynamics consistently appeared to alter was in the participants' relationship with their parents and siblings. The participants' relationships with their parents was affected in a number of

ways. One shift in the dynamics of parental relationships consistently described was feeling rejected or abandoned by their parents. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) note that both children and adolescents experience a sense of rejection from the departed parent. Wallerstein and Kelly suggest that this is caused by the loss of one or both parents to their own concerns of loneliness, conflicted loyalties, anger, sense of their own vulnerability and worry over changed financial status and domestic problems. Several participants described feeling lonely for several years after their parents' divorce. Their parents were often absent due to financial obligations, or were absent in an emotional sense. One participant said her mother was depressed after the divorce, and so was not there emotionally for her to give her the support and love that had been there for her before the divorce.

Feelings of rejection were also created in other ways. The divorce had a tendency to provoke the participants into taking sides. The children felt that they sided with their mother or their father in the divorce. This "side-taking" led to factions within the family, and feelings of anger and rejection. One participant described feeling rejected by her mother and sister because she supported her father's decision to divorce. Her sister chose to support her mother, and carried mixed feelings toward her father. On the one hand she felt angry at her father for leaving their home and starting another family, but she also felt loss and rejection. Prior to the divorce she described herself as being very close to her father, and so this shift in

allegiances was particularly painful.

r: You're supersensitized to feeling rejected?

p: Oh totally, rejection. . . I am really sensitive to rejection.

The loss of one parent from the home was perceived to be the most immediate and apparent initial loss. While this loss was a painful one and seemed to create painful feelings such as rejection, most participants felt that they were able to reconcile this loss. The absence of one parent however created some fairly prominent environmental changes for the participants, and interestingly some of these environmental changes were experienced as a greater problem than the actual loss of a parent, usually the father, from their home. There were also some benefits, participants felt, to be gained by the altered dynamics in their homes, and these benefits helped to reconcile their loss.

One of the benefits described by participants was gaining a second parental home. Part of adolescence is exploring new options and bargaining for new freedoms. Having access to two parental homes provided the participants with a greater degree of freedom than they had experienced prior to the divorce. As well, because their parents' attention after their divorce was often focused on their new situations and on new relationships, the participants enjoyed an additional degree of freedom.

Another benefit which arose from the divorce was finding they now enjoyed a closer relationship with their fathers. Prior to the divorce most participants had lived in fairly

traditional homes in which the mothers were responsible for the bulk of parenting responsibilities. As a result of this, the participants described spending very little time with their fathers. The divorce however created a situation where the participants were forced to dedicate more time to their fathers, often entire weekends. Some participants were initially very reluctant as they had never spent time like this with their fathers in the past, and they were jealous of their weekend time. However, those participants that did eventually visit their fathers on weekends described feeling much closer now to their fathers. It was as if, ironically, the divorce gave them back a parent. So, they perceived the initial loss of their fathers from their home as actually precipitating an increased closeness with their fathers.

Having access to two homes also gave rise to what I describe as a holiday phenomenon. Generally the participants' fathers enjoyed a higher standard of living, and were able to provide weekend treats that their mothers could not afford. Visits with their fathers then were a welcome relief from the often harsher reality of their mothers' homes. Most of the mothers were struggling to make ends meet. Many participants described living much more frugally after the divorce. Interestingly, none of the participants felt that their fathers should contribute more to the financial support of their mothers' homes. Rather, they simply enjoyed the benefits at their fathers' homes. Their mothers were often perceived either as depressing complainers, or were marvelled at for their ability

to make ends meet. All of the participants learned that being able to financially support themselves was of central importance to them. They did not want to have to struggle like their mothers did. Their commitment to this was supported by the fact that six out of the eight participants I interviewed were either attending university, or had concrete plans to attend.

The environmental change that was perceived by the participants to have caused them the greatest hardship was the addition of stepparents and stepchildren to their home. This addition required the participants to make enormous adjustments in their sense of what constituted family. They had reconciled the loss of one parent from the home because this loss had initiated some balances and benefits which I have described. However, the participants reported that there were very few benefits to be gained from stepparents.

Santrock (1987) suggests that research on the topic of adolescents' reactions to growing up in different family structures is lacking. I have not encountered much discussion on this topic, and yet this seems to be an area of central concern for the participants in this study.

One of the reasons, I believe, that stepparents and stepchildren constituted such an area of concern for participants is because they were perceived to be an unacceptable challenge to the participants' sense of family. Their traditional sense of family had already been severely altered, and they were not prepared to accept any more changes

over which they had no control. It seems that the participants in this study had not clearly articulated to themselves how and why they perceived stepparents and stepchildren to be a threat to their sense of family. Instead, the participants had simply chosen to dislike their new family members. Their dislike was, for them, ample evidence as to why their stepparents should not be easily accepted by them.

While the loss of one parent from the home seemed to bring some benefits, the addition of stepparents for all but one participant seemed to bring nothing positive into their lives. For the single participant who readily accepted her stepparent and stepsiblings, her new family seemed to make up for the loss of the the family she had known, particularly because she felt that her mother and sister had rejected her for accepting her father's actions. For the other participants stepparents generally decreased the amount of time and attention their parents' gave them, particularly recreational time. As well, stepparents or parents' companions often expressed jealousy over the time the parents committed to their children.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) discuss how stepparents and parents' companions tended to create a sense of competition within the children. This competition seemed to exist in terms of the participants' feelings of jealousy, and also in their sense of belongingness. Not only did the participants feel that they had lost their traditional homes, but they were also losing the parents they had known to the influence of their new companions. Again this was perceived as an infraction against

their sense of control over what constituted family. As one participant noted:

p: I guess it doesn't feel like home at Dad's because it's -'s house, it's not really Dad's house, she decorates it, she looks after it, it's her house. She's the boss there, but she won't be boss of us sort of thing, she doesn't want to be a part of our lives, doesn't want us to be a part of hers.

The Learning and Growing Process

The process of adapting to environmental changes addresses the variations in the participants' environment that were most salient for the participants. I believe that the experience of these changes precipitated internal modifications as well. This next process will describe these conceptual changes, and examine any related research.

One of the environmental changes discussed was how the absence of one parent from the home led to an alteration in the relationship between the participants and one or both of their parents. The participants described feeling rejected initially, and they also felt angry and threatened by the changes they saw occurring in their parents. The girls had counted on their parents to maintain their traditional values and roles. The divorce however often seemed to precipitate behaviours in their parents that the participants found distressing. Much of the girls' distress arose from their confusion over their own values and beliefs. They had unconsciously counted on their parents to be role models for them, and to provide them with a secure, dependable home. When their parents contravened these expectations, some of the girls felt lost, confused and helpless. One girl who had particularly admired her father before the divorce felt especially confused and betrayed.

p: Like Dad shouldn't be with her, it was just, it was immoral. But the thing that was so hard was he was like a God to me, he represented, he was never wrong, he did everything right, he was perfect and all that, and that just totally shattered the image. I didn't know what to think anymore.

The altered dynamics of the post-divorce home also seems responsible for internal changes. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) suggest that in divorced homes adolescents may experience a sense of turmoil because of loosened controls on discipline. The effect of these changes, according to Wallerstein and Kelly, can be dangerous for teenagers who may not yet possess the internal discipline required to keep them safe from the undisciplined, often wild world of the adolescent. "The divorce left them feeling vulnerable to their own newly strengthened sexual and aggressive impulses, and surrounded by the temptations of the adolescent world without the supports that would hold them to a straight course" (1980, p. 83). Kalter, (in Wallerstein, 1985) suggests "a time bomb-like reaction for girls and that adolescence may trigger symptomatic responses including precocious sexual activity, substance abuse, and running away from home" (p. 516).

The participants in this study appeared to have responded to reduced discipline, or the altered structure in the home, differently. While the participants discussed using alcohol, none felt that their behaviours were out of control, or really out of the normal range of behaviours for adolescents. But the participants did respond to the altered dynamics of their homes. In particular, some participants described feeling as if they grew up more quickly than their friends from non-divorced homes. They felt that their natural separation from their parents had been hastened by the divorce. While

they did not turn to the type of precocious behaviours described by Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), and Kalter (in Wallerstein, 1985), they felt pressured by these changes nonetheless.

Adolescence is typically described as a period when separation and growing independence are central issues for the child (Rice, 1981). Divorce affects these issues by creating a type of unnatural separation within the family. Where normally the adolescent would be preparing to leave her family, instead it is one parent who leaves. This affects the relationship the child has with both her parents. As one participant commented, she needed to be able to leave her mother, rather than her mother leaving her. She felt, like the youngster described in the Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) study, as if she "[were] being thrown out into the world before I was ready!" (p. 83).

Schwartzberg (1981) comments that "family disruption poses a very specific hazard to the normal adolescent process of emancipation from primary love objects" (p. 122). The child requires a stable, safe family that she can begin to disengage from at a rate which is comfortable for her. The girls who felt that they had lost their relationship with their mother via the divorce were especially confused and threatened. It seems that their mother represented greater security for them, and to lose her suddenly left them feeling alone and insecure.

p: I think that was the time when I probably needed a mother the most. Although I wanted to separate from my family then but you need to know it's there, you need to know that that base is there and that you can separate from it.

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p: I mean even now I don't want to, I half want her to treat me like an adult, and treat me like a little kid, you know like to be there and mother me.

The most outstanding internal transformation I consistently witnessed was the participants' deep desire for control in their lives. I saw in the initial interviews that this need for control appeared to be a predominant issue. When I discussed this issue with the participants in the second interview, I came to see that this was a central concern for all of the participants except two. One participant who did not voice this concern was also the one participant who had supported her father's actions, and her support, I believe, provided her with a sense of control. The other participant, I think, may have some concerns in this area, but has not yet begun to explore them. Although the other participants had not articulated this issue, once they were aware of it they were able to describe how this need for control was born from their feelings of having little control over their parents' divorce and the resulting changes the divorce precipitated. The majority of the participants described feeling the need for control in their domestic lives, and in particular in their more intimate relationships.

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) describe an increased sense of vulnerability in children and adolescents. These authors

suggest that this is because the children "confronted a world which suddenly appeared to have become less reliable, less predictable, and less likely in their view to provide for their needs and expectations" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980, p. 45). This sense of vulnerability did exist for the participants, and it appears to be the result of their fear that the world is unpredictable. Some of the participants described in poignant terms how their world was suddenly changed for them, and how they were unsure whether their new family could replace what they had had.

p: I saw it (the family) as one unit and without it being one unit I didn't know if it could be true, if we could be happy.

Most of the participants had believed that they could depend on their home and parents being the same safe, secure place and people throughout their youths. They had predicted that the home they knew and were comfortable with would always be there for them. Attribution theory argues that making these kinds of predictions is normal behaviour for people because we need to feel that we have control over our lives. If we did not feel that we could not reasonably predict our worlds, we would experience our world as frightening places. Kelley (1971) suggests that: "Attribution processes are to be understood not only as a way of providing the individual with a veridical view of his world, but as a means of encouraging and maintaining his effective exercise of control in that world" (p. 22).

Attribution theory suggests that those individuals who feel that they have control over their worlds, who exhibit a sense of mastery, enjoy higher self-esteem and a lower incidence of depression than those who feel externally controlled by their worlds (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978). Research has also indicated that individuals may seek a sense of personal control in situations where their ability to exert control is very limited (Bulman & Wortman, 1977). This research suggests that individuals can feel so threatened by their loss of control they will distort their reality to regain their sense of control.

The participants in this study remarked that, to a degree, the need to feel in control had been, and for most still was, an accurate appraisal of their personalities. The participants described a number of ways that they took control over their lives and worked to establish a sense of predictability within it. Most of the participants described having difficulty trusting people. It could be argued that approaching other people cautiously is one way of maintaining control around how you feel in your relationships. The more information the participants had about people, the less likely they were to be surprised by them.

A number of the participants also described trying to protect their parents from the painful situations the divorce evoked. As one participant commented, she felt as if she was

trying to parent her parents. By taking responsibility for their parents they were able to control their own vicarious feelings of pain about the divorce. Another participant described trying to take responsibility for others' feelings as a way of avoiding her own feelings of helplessness and abandonment. Another participant said she wanted control so much her friends described her as bossy. Many of the participants worked hard at school so that their resulting career would help them to avoid feeling dependent financially.

The other area of concern which was commonly expressed by the participants was their fears around the success of their own relationships. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) also remarked that the adolescents in their study expressed concerns about the stability and success of their relationships and marriages. I believe that this concern arises out of the participants desire for control, and their fear that they may not be able to control or predict the stability of their relationships. This fear was raised numerous times by all the participants except for the participant who did not express an unnatural desire for control in her life. Many feared that they would have little control over their relationships with men and currently had trouble trusting their boyfriends or even interest in initiating relationships. One participant stated most succinctly how this fear developed from her parents' divorce.

p: Our relationships and how we view relationships has to alter because we saw a relationship working, and not working or never working or whatever, and so when you see your parents, the one thing that's supposed to be stable, not working then there's a lot of doubt that it ever can.

I believe it is plausible to argue that the participants' desire for control over their world developed from experiencing feelings of uncontrollability and helplessness at an early age. A world they had believed was predictable became, relatively suddenly, unpredictable. Rubin and Peplau (1975) describe just world theory as a way to conceptualize individuals' need to see one's world as a predictable place.

Rubin and Peplau note:

The belief that the world is a just place seems to provide part of the scaffolding needed to support an internal locus of control. If the world were not just, people might strive for reinforcements and then fail to get them because of unforeseen external events. Thus the belief in a just world seems necessary if one's sense of personal efficacy is to be maintained. (1975, p. 79)

Some of the participants described in moving terms how confused and threatened they felt when they realized the world they had known was gone for them. Some described feeling that their sense of reality had become distorted for them. The one participant who had never enjoyed a secure home has striven to make a secure home for herself now as an independent young adult. Security, predictability and control have been an important part of the participants' lives, and I believe these needs have developed as a way of avoiding re-experiencing feelings of helplessness.

In summary, the process of learning and growing explored the beliefs that arose for participants from experiencing parental divorce. This internal dialogue included questioning beliefs upon morality and values. The divorce altered the

stable roles the participants' parents had held prior to the divorce, and this alteration was experienced as confusing and threatening. Participants also described feeling as if the divorce precipitated the separation process between themselves and their parents at an unnatural and uncomfortable rate. This hastened separation was also experienced as threatening. Last, I discussed how the participants sense of personal control was affected by the divorce. The need for control was examined within the framework of attribution theory (Abramson, Seligman & Teasdale, 1978) and just world theory (Rubin & Peplau, 1975). These theories suggest that individuals require a sense of control over their worlds, and that individuals who do not enjoy this exhibit lowered self-esteem, a reduced sense of mastery and increased incidents of depression. In order to believe that one does exert control over one's world, one must also believe that the world is a predictable and just place. As I discussed, one of the foremost lessons the participants seemed to have learned from their parents' divorce is that the world can be a very capricious one.

The Process of Restructuring Meaning and Moving Toward Resolution

The process of learning and growing was essentially the internal experience of parental divorce. The divorce produced environmental changes which in turn produced an alteration in the participants' belief systems. This process was a difficult one for many of the participants as it created feelings of vulnerability and helplessness. The process of restructuring meaning and moving toward resolution of the divorce experience will examine how many of the participants resolved these feelings by modifying their way of perceiving their world. These modifications in beliefs ultimately have led to acceptance of the changes they have undergone.

How individuals construe their effect on their world and the meaning their lives hold for them is what defines that individual's reality. "If I define a situation as pleasant, threatening, boring, challenging, or fantastic, the way in which I have defined it establishes the status that situation has within my world" (Natanson, in Schutz, 1971, p. xxxvi). Attribution theory argues that interpretation is the fundamental part of individual reality. How an individual explains and interprets his or her world will influence that person's emotional and behavioural responses to it (Kelley & Michela, 1980). Attribution theory suggests that as people try to make sense of their world, they make theories, or predictions, about what influences are at work in their world.

The participants in the present study described experiencing a period of trauma soon after the divorce. While the initial intense emotions eventually lessened, the participants drew some cognitive conclusions from their experience. These conclusions, such as the world is unpredictable and it is important to constantly feel in control of one's world, created feelings of vulnerability and tension for the participants. Ultimately, many of the participants described leaving these beliefs behind. In order to accomplish this, the participants began to alter the meaning they ascribed to events. This change in meaning has been accompanied by, for many of the participants, an increased sense of mastery, maturity, and acceptance of their situations.

While the desire for control continues to be an issue for many of the participants, they describe how they have gradually come to see the need for increased flexibility in their lives. Several participants described being able to let go of constantly imposing their own reality, their own need to control, over the rest of the world. Some of the participants expressed a desire to experience life spontaneously, and let go of their need to constantly predict their world. Rubin and Peplau (1975) suggest that children begin to lose their need to believe in a just world as they gradually begin to experience injustice and unpredictability. Children who do not develop a more sophisticated belief system can grow into adults who maintain a rigid, inflexible belief system.

It would be misleading to suggest that the participants in this study have fully resolved all of the issues that the divorce created for them. Research from longitudinal studies on children from divorced homes is now suggesting that children from divorced homes continue to suffer from psychological problems well into early adulthood. Kelly (1981) comments that of the 18 adolescents studied in her longitudinal study on children from divorced homes, at the five year follow-up, only five were doing well. Ten, she says, had "significant psychological difficulties" (p. 136). Wallerstein writes that of the adolescents she interviewed, "I did not expect the experience to endure so fully for so many, with such high drama and passions" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 20). She also comments that "we are allowing our children to bear the psychological, economic, and moral brunt of divorce" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 308).

The evidence from the present study suggests that many of the participants did undergo psychological difficulties for several years following their parents' divorce. These difficulties, such as feelings of vulnerability, arose from issues of lack of control and an early separation from their parents. However, the participants at present believe that they have, or are about to, resolve these concerns and leave their parents' divorce behind them. Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) study however suggests some ominous findings. In it, they note that half of the female subjects between 19 and 23 showed serious

concerns around committing themselves to romantic relationships.

Interestingly, Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) study showed that the men in their study felt they had little direction in their lives or sense of control. The participants in the present study seemed to suggest they had initiated almost too much direction in their lives, and this tendency to want to always mold and shape their worlds arose out of their feelings of little control over it.

Some of the participants still describe feeling angry, depressed and sad, even though their parents' divorce occurred for some up to six years ago. These participants feel that this is because their parents never did adjust to the divorce. The post-divorce homes they grew up in continued to be ones filled with tensions and fighting. These participants are still struggling to put their parents' divorce behind them. As one young woman commented, "A lot of people think that divorce, well that's it, but it carries on, like the fights are still going on, and it's difficult."

This observation concurs with Hetherington's (1979) comment that the "well-being of the child later depends upon the adjustment of the household" (p. 852). This statement describes an essential component in the participants' ability to adjust to their parents' divorce. Those participants who felt that the divorce did not affect them greatly also believed that their home had changed little after the divorce, and or believed that the resulting home was warm and supportive.

While parental divorce does seem to exercise some long-lasting effects, overall the participants in this study appear to have made the transitions the divorce required of them with success, insight and an increased sense of personal dignity and mastery. Out of the participants' feelings of powerlessness and depression there has grown an increased sense of agency and control over their own destinies. Schwartzberg (1981) comments, "If the disruption [of the family] does not come prior to normal detachment, independence and maturation may even be facilitated. The adolescent may be able to 'transform' feelings of helplessness into a sense of control by active mastery" (p. 122). The participants in this study would suggest that experiencing parental divorce does come prior to natural detachment, and that this experience can promote the transformation of feelings of helplessness into feelings of personal power.

Experiencing parental divorce spurred the participants in this study to feel the need for increased personal control in their lives. Feeling helpless over the sudden loss of their childhood world and beliefs associated with that world caused them to decide that, within their own lives, they would take charge. It appears that the divorce has also precipitated the participants to reevaluate and explore their belief systems. Consequently, I feel that the participants in this study showed greater maturity and personal insight than is customary for this age. The participants also believed this to be true. They had experienced a great need for control in their lives, and were learning to give this need up in favour of

experiencing life as it really is. Their friends from non-divorced homes, they felt, had never felt this need, or even begun to question life to the degree they have.

What then was the experience of parental divorce like for these girls, and how did it change their lives? The participants in this study described experiencing their parents' divorce as something very painful, and this evoked a number of emotions for them such as feelings of loss, abandonment, shock, and vulnerability. The participants also identified several issues that arose out of the losses and changes they experienced. The most profound issues centered upon their degenerated relationships with one of their parents, the demands made upon their sense of family, and the beliefs that developed from experiencing a powerfully uncontrollable and unhappy event.

This study argues that in response to the divorce, the participants' emotions, issues, and beliefs seemed to occur in a similar fashion and sequence. First, the participants endured the painful emotions evoked by the divorce, then experienced the changes in their environment, and then began to adapt to these changes by altering their belief systems. Those participants that appear to have resolved their parents' divorce have completed this sequence. That they have resolved these issues is shown by their acceptance of the very issues they described as previously being areas of concern, that they perceive their lives positively now, and describe themselves as having accepted the divorce. These participants have managed to transform their feelings of vulnerability, which arguably were created by the

divorce, into feelings of agency and mastery over their lives. Where once they had difficulty trusting, they now say they feel secure enough to feel insecure.

For other participants though the cycle is still incomplete. They have not yet resolved some or all of the issues the divorce precipitated. For some participants, this seems to be because they have denied or repressed their feelings about their parents' divorce. Much of their energy is still channeled into trying to perceive the divorce as being less painful than it probably was for them. Also, some participants describe still having difficulty trusting, still appear to have concerns around personal control, and appear still angry and bitter about the divorce. These participants seem to have not explored their beliefs as thoroughly as the participants who have resolved the divorce. They are stuck in a belief system which causes them to try and protect themselves through constantly exerting control over their worlds.

The movement through these four processes is gradual and diffuse. The process of resolution does not occur overnight, and participants move back and forth between the beliefs that arose out of the divorce, and the resolution of these beliefs. Overall, more of the participants in this study seem to have resolved these issues than have the participants who have not. For those participants who have not, knowledge of these processes may be useful. From a counselling perspective, participants may be assisted by recognizing how the divorce caused them to feel vulnerable, and how they may be responding to their worlds to

help defend against this feeling. It may also be helpful to be aware of the powerful emotional responses divorce creates, and to help participants feel able to confront their feelings around the divorce. Last, I found that the interview process was validating for the participants. Most said they had never talked about the divorce this intimately or intensely with anyone else before. It was validating for them to recognize that their experience was a shared one, and that their feelings and responses were normal.

At the beginning of this thesis I used the story of Sysyphus to describe how individuals choose to assume control over their own destinies rather than assigning that control outside of themselves. I believe the story of Sysyphus continues to serve as an apt metaphor to describe the participants' increased maturity and flexibility. Most of these young women have decided it is better to experience life in all of its vicissitudes than to impose an artificial reality upon it. Like Sysyphus, these girls chose to retreat from psychological darkness to the rich completeness of life, and in this choice are willing to experience fully the caprices of life.

Summary of Findings

Many of the findings of this study confirm existing research on the topic. Divorce is a traumatic event for children to undergo, and this trauma can be long-lasting. The results from longitudinal studies on children from divorced homes are relatively new, and these findings are suggesting that children's experience of parental divorce can create more long-term suffering than had been originally anticipated. The present study, in part, seems to confirm this finding.

This study sought to explore late adolescents' experience of their parents' divorce. Most of the participants had undergone this experience at least five years prior to the study, and so had had ample time to reflect upon the changes they witnessed within themselves. What the present study found which was new to the field was that many of the participants described learning to feel powerless as a result of their parents' divorce, and to help overcome this feeling the participants tended to over-control their lives. Learning to feel more flexible and to stop searching for ultimate control has taken most of the participants the bulk of their adolescence to resolve.

The movement of the participants' resolution of divorce has been divided into four processes, or stages. These processes are a new way of interpreting the experience of parental divorce, particularly from a long-term perspective. While this study concurs with Wallerstein and Blakeslee's

(1989) description of the divorce process being the single greatest cause of pain in children's lives, the final process of resolution described by this study suggests that most participants eventually are able to resolve the issues created by experiencing parental divorce. When and if resolution occurs, there appears to develop an increased sense of agency and maturity, and this finding differs from Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) study.

This study also illustrates that the removal of a parent from an adolescent's home is a difficult event to adjust to, however for most participants the greater and more painful adjustment occurred with the introduction of stepparents and stepsiblings. Stepparents seemed to create a final, and unacceptable imposition upon the participants.

The participants' desire for control was interpreted using a theoretical framework which seems to be a new way of understanding the divorce experience. Using some of the tenets of just world theory and attribution theory helped to illustrate the divorce process from a new perspective.

Limitations of the Study and Suggestions for Further Research

A phenomenological study does not seek to test hypotheses, rather it seeks to define the richness of an experience. From this perspective then it is difficult to generalize the findings of this study beyond the participants studied. However, this study did produce some new insights which may well be suited to further exploration utilizing a different methodology.

In particular, it would be interesting to explore whether the four processes this study described are prototypical of the general experience of parental divorce. Also, research might explore further the issue of control. Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) suggests that divorce has a long-reaching, often detrimental effect upon children. The findings from this study suggest that perhaps the children's belief that the world is uncontrollable may be the basis for some of their difficulty in adjusting.

One obvious limitation of this study is its focus on only female adolescents. Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) study suggests that males react differently as young adults to parental divorce than do females. Further research then could focus on both male and female responses to parental divorce.

Summary

This study sought to examine adolescent girls' experience of their parents' divorce. Interviewing eight adolescent girls from ages 16 to 19 twice provided the study with a rich description of the divorce experience. The interviews showed that while each participant experienced her parents' divorce in her own unique fashion, a number of common themes did develop. These themes, or topical headings, were compiled into four processes which described the progression of the experience of parental divorce. These processes were the immediate experience of divorce, the process of adapting to environmental change, the learning and growing process, and the process of restructuring meaning and moving toward resolution.

A comparison of the literature on the topic of children's experience of parental divorce showed some similarities with the present study. The experience of divorce often produces long-term trauma which is best reduced by the quality of the post-divorce home (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). Wallerstein and Blakeslee's (1989) study suggests that children can continue to have psychological difficulties well into early adulthood. While the divorce continued to be an issue for many of the participants, this study's findings suggest that most of the participants were well on their way to resolving the pain of the divorce. It appeared that the process of resolution lay in altering the cognitive lessons many of the participants had made as a result of their parents' divorce. Many of the participants described having a high need for control, and the introduction

of increased flexibility came only through eventually accepting life's changeable nature, which in a sense was also accepting their parents' divorce. This study also described how divorce alters the dynamics of the post-divorce home, and the effects these altered dynamics appear to exert.

Attribution theory and just world theory were used to examine the participants' desire for control. Participants' need for control, it was argued, arose out of their original assumption that the world was unjust and unpredictable, and this seemed to lead to feelings of helplessness.

In the second interview with the participants I shared some of my insights into their experience. We found three themes which were a new way of looking at their experience. These themes were: why the participants perceived their stepparents negatively, how divorce hastens the natural separation process between children and their parents, and the participants' need for control in their lives.

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Appendix C

Interview Guide - First Interview

1. Would you describe what it was like for you during your parents' divorce?
2. Do you remember what it was like for you when you were first told? Where were you? Who were you with? What did you do after you learned about it?
3. What is it like for you now?
4. Can you tell me the story of your parents' divorce?
5. Can you describe the events that you think led up to the divorce.
6. Do you feel like you had any control over the divorce?
7. Does the fact that your parents' divorced make any sense to you?
8. Did you feel like you had much control over what happened? What was that feeling like?
9. Do you believe that your parents' divorce has changed the way that you think about things?
10. Do you feel that you are a different person since the divorce? In what ways are you different, what ways the same?
11. In what ways has the divorce not affected you?
12. Could you describe whether there are ways you think your parent's divorce could affect your own relationships or future relationships?
13. What have you learned about life since you learned your parents were divorcing?
14. Is there anything else important about your parents' divorce that helps to describe your experience of it?

Appendix D

Interview Guide - Second Interview

1. Stresses evoked by stepparents

- a) initial jealousy over parents' lovers.
- b) continued jealousy and frustrations around parents' lovers.
- c) stepparent jealous of child's relationship with spouse.
- d) parents jealous, bitter and hostile towards ex-spouse's lovers.
- e) resentment and feeling of disloyalty around accepting stepparent in parental role.
- f) would like stepparent to assume parental role.
- g) complicated sense of abandonment that stems from parent siding with lovers instead of with their own children.
- h) adjustment to stepbrothers and stepsisters and half-brothers and sisters.

2. Relationship between parents and child is altered

- a) rift is created between one child and one parent.
- b) deep sense of loss over this rift, and anger.
- c) divorce precipitates a closer, warmer relationship with one parent.
- d) protects and parents one parent.
- e) plays mediator role, very hurtful to witness parents blame and hate each other.
- f) rarely articulate feelings and experience of divorce. This is partly because it is difficult to talk about the divorce to one or both parents because of their anger and pain. Discussing the experience of the divorce then is not modelled within the family.
- g) resentment around expectations parents and family hold of the children ie. are expected to play roles such as pretending everything is okay, or that they did not hear fighting.
- h) parent directs his/her anger from ex-spouse toward child ie child is told she is like her father/mother.

3. Relationship between child and siblings is altered.

- a) enemy camps are established between siblings.
- b) become much closer to siblings, draw strength from them.
- c) siblings become an interim family.
- d) without siblings, child's relationship with custodial parent is deepened and in some ways more dependent.

4. View of world threatened

- a) question what is morality when witness parents defy their own moral code.
- b) knowledge of parental affairs is experienced as highly threatening.
- c) difficulty trusting people.
- d) sense of abandonment from one parent leaving, but able to rationalize and understand this.
- e) shattering of their belief in a just, predictable world.
- f) the world is not predictable, therefore you must be flexible.

- g)sense of distorted, confusing reality.
- h)life is unpredictable.
- i)control over my own life is very important.

5. Family breakdown

- a)effects sense of personal motivation - drew motivation from family, consequently must now begin to direct motivation internally, school performance often affected.
- b)engaged in rebellious behaviour which usually surfaced a year after the divorce and continued for a few years. If did not actually rebel, may have considered it.
- c)questioned identity, ie should I be a rebel, who am I now?
- d)drew a great deal of identity from family.
- e)sense of abandonment as custodial parent withdraws within self.
- f)feels neglected, alone.
- g)blames one or both parent for particular behaviours.

6. Changing homes

- a)holiday phenomenon with non-custodial parent.
- b)now has the option of living with other family - effects the relationship with custodial parents as child for first time has real bargaining power.
- c)changing homes very unsettling.
- d)changing schools is threatening and affects many areas of life ie child experiences more losses such as friends, familiarity, grades affected.
- e)emotional tug of war for children when considering who to live with - very draining emotionally, want to protect parents.

7. Gained maturity

- a)understand that experience brings insight and growth, consequently even painful experience has its good side.
- b)feel could deal better with divorce in their own life as have already experienced it once - have faced the lion in its den.
- c)believe the divorce was for the best - prefer that parents live apart happily than together unhappily, although the former is not always a given occurrence.
- d)strong sense of personal responsibility. Insist upon their own independence and being able to support selves.
- e)sense of independence cause create disagreements with custodial parent.
- f)friends are supportive - but do not really understand.
- g)grew up quickly, more mature in many ways now than their friends.

8. Views on relationships

- a)worldly, sophisticated, realistic views of relationships.
- b)don't want to rush into marriage.
- c)difficulty trusting men and friends.
- d)frightened of divorce dogging them.
- e)willing to accept changing nature of relationships.

- f) desperately do not want to make the same relationship mistakes their parents made.
- g) believe they could make good stepparents because of their own experience, but would prefer to avoid this type of family for themselves.
- h) plan to be cautious, choosy and work hard at own relationships.

9. Finances

- a) resentment toward one parent, usually the father, over financial support.
- b) feels pain over mother's suffering and anger at limited financial support from ex-husband.
- c) money used as a weapon.
- d) does not ever want to be financially dependent like her mother.

10. Sense of family

- a) mourns loss of traditional, happy family, particularly the loss of stability.
- b) accepts divorced family as the norm.
- c) sense of tradition is lost, mourns this loss ie Christmas.
- d) weird having new brothers and sisters much younger than self.
- e) fighting between parents hurtful and painful, feels helpless.
- f) tension in home.

11. Experience of the divorce

- a) painful.
- b) felt torn, caught in the middle.
- c) deep sense of loss.
- d) deep sadness.
- e) extremely pervasive experience.
- f) felt alone.
- g) confused.
- h) helpless, no control.

12. Ways of coping

- a) deny experience.
- b) keep personal control.
- c) do well at school.
- d) shift focus to friends.
- e) repress painful memories.
- f) shift focus to siblings.
- g) direct anger outward ie school or parent or stepparent.
- h) direct anger inward, ie self.