

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL DIVORCE

by

CHRISTINE LYNN OLSON

(Under the Direction of Patricia Bell-Scott)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe six women's experience of parental divorce as reflected in their personal stories. Data was collected from in depth interviews on each women's story of parental divorce concerning the themes of communication, loss, violence and abuse, and views on future relationships. The narratives were analyzed according to Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory method.

In using constant-comparative analysis, the investigator identified five clinical themes. The five areas consist of: (1) developmental stage of the child, (2) relational dynamics, (3) exposure to a traumatic event, (4) post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomology, and (5) internal states and behavioral components. The first area, developmental stage of the child, examined the ability of the women to master the developmental task for preschool age children according to the research by Erickson (1960). The second area, relational dynamics, examined women's accounts of relationship changes

resulting from the divorce process that may have contributed to the degree of trauma. The third area, exposure to psychic trauma, examined the women's exposure to abuse within the context of their story of parental divorce. The fourth area, PTSD symptomology, examined the women's internal coping mechanisms. The fifth area, internal states and behavior components, examined the women's thoughts and feelings of their parents' divorce and how they have organized their lives around these feelings.

The findings of this study are discussed in the context of the existing literature on long term effects of parental divorce on children. Suggestions on future research along with therapeutic and social implications are presented.

INDEX WORDS: Long-term effects of parental divorce on female children, Trauma and divorce, Grounded theory, Constant-comparative analysis

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by

CHRISTINE LYNN OLSON

B.S., Florida State University, 1986

M.A., State University of West Georgia, 1989

Ed.S., State University of West Georgia, 1990

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University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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CHRISTINE LYNN OLSON

Major Professor: Patricia Bell-Scott

Committee: Mick Coleman
Charlotte Wallinga

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2007

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although there had been an abundance of research and popular interest in the elevated divorce rate of the last three decades, women's accounts of their experience of parental divorce have virtually gone unheard and, for most women, unspoken in any systematic manner. How female children had been affected by parental divorce largely remains in question. Most researchers studying the effects of parental divorce have reported demographics as if this experience were a static event in children's life. Many women now in their adult years still struggle with issues stemming from parental divorce, yet researchers rarely look at long-term effects. For some women, the experience of parental divorce, may be an ongoing, even hidden, issue in their adult lives. This issue may become evident when women put words and a voice to their experience.

In the 1970s, the divorce rate reached new heights and has remained high into the new century. Approximately one million children living in the United States experience parental divorce each year (National Center for Health Statistics, 2003). While high numbers of children experiencing parental divorce has prompted a great deal of research, much of this research has been gender biased (Zaslow, 1988).

Initially researchers focused on the effects of parental divorce on male children. Also, many researchers were concerned with externalizing behaviors, such as delinquency, trouble with the law, acting out in school, and behavior problems in the home, associated with male coping behaviors. Not until researchers began to focus on internal states, feelings and thoughts, did findings emerge that showed female children were negatively affected by parental divorce--but in different ways and at different developmental points than male children (Emery, 1982; Wallerstein, 2000; Zalsow, 1988).

Due to differing methodologies and foci, research focusing on how the female child was affected by parental divorce has been riddled with inconsistencies. Some studies supported the notion there was little to no significant effect on female children experiencing parental divorce (Demo & Acock, 1988; Edwards 1987; Glenn, 1985; Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Hetherington, 1979; Kasen, Cohen, Brook, & Hartmack, 1996; Kelly, 1993; Kurdek, 1981; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995; Rutter, 1970). Whereas, other studies indicated that female children experienced negative repercussions from parental divorce (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Amato & Keith, 1991; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Long, 1987; McCabe, 1997; Murphy, 1991; Wallerstein, 2000; Wallerstein & Lewis 1998; Zaslow, 1988). In further studies, researchers came to identify long-term negative effects that parental divorce had on female children (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Research focusing on internal states and processes may be a more appropriate way of exploring women's struggles with parental divorce than outcome studies. One avenue for exploring these internal states and processes is through women's stories of the parental divorce experience.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the subjective meaning of parental divorce for women. This study is important for several reasons. First, since one-third of all children in the United States will experience parental divorce (Stevenson & Black, 1995), this is an issue of concern for a significant portion of youth and their families. Given the number of researchers who claim that parental divorce has little to no effect on female children (McCabe, 1997), it is crucial that research without this assumption be conducted.

Second, because the majority of research concerning the effects of parental divorce on children has focused on externalizing behaviors associated with male coping mechanisms, there is a need for studies that capture the internal states and emotional coping styles of girls (Zaslow, 1988). Zaslow (1988) has also explained that males and females use fundamentally different coping styles. Males externalize their struggles exhibiting problem behaviors, whereas females internalize their struggles experiencing self-esteem and identity difficulties.

Third, there are few studies on long-term effects of parental divorce for female children, and in those existing

studies, the findings suggest that female children struggle with issues from parental divorce well into adulthood (Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, 2005). In fact, some researchers have suggested a "sleeper effect" where the greatest impact of parental divorce emerged in the female child's early adult life as she attempted to establish intimate relationships of her own (Wallerstein, 1985).

Fourth, there are discrepancies in the research as to the effects of parental divorce on preschool age children. Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) have found the least long-term effects from parental divorce in preschool children; whereas other scholars have found preschool age children to be the most distressed by parental separation (Van Der Kolk, 1996; Zill, Morrision, & Coiro, 1993).

Fifth, because intervention has become a popular strategy for dealing with children experiencing parental divorce, professionals need an understanding of the complex meaning of this experience in order to develop interventions and therapeutic strategies for female children.

Finally, most researchers studying this area have used quantitative techniques and focused on demographic trends and outcomes. Few qualitative studies had been conducted. Given that children's coping strategies and trauma are gendered (Emery, 1982), there is a need for qualitative studies that better illuminate the internal processes of women.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore and describe women's experience of parental divorce. Specifically, the focus was to gain insight into women's subjective experience of parental divorce as reflected in their personal stories. Particular attention was given to internal states of being and relational dynamics. Internal states have to do with women's thoughts and feelings about their experiences; relational dynamics have to do with what occurs between people (e.g., communication and behavior patterns).

The criteria for inclusion in this study were: (1) women had to be between the ages 25 and 35 years, (2) they experienced the beginning of the parental divorce process while they were between the ages of 3 and 6 years, and (3) they were in a long-term relationship of at least one year and lived with their partner. It is my hope that this study will give a voice to women's experience and illuminate any internal struggles they may still be experiencing connected to parental divorce.

Assumptions from Erikson's (1960) psychosocial theory were used to guide this study. Psychosocial theory is concerned with the individual's ego development throughout the life-span. This theory consists of eight stages of development: (stage 1) basic trust vs. mistrust, (stage 2) Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt, (stage 3) Initiative vs. Guilt, (stage 4) Industry vs. Inferiority, (stage 5) Identity vs. Confusion, (stage 6) Intimacy

vs. Isolation, (stage 7) Generativity vs. Stagnation, and (stage 8) Integrity vs. Despair.

A basic assumption of psychosocial theory is that in each stage an individual will experience a conflict to be resolved which will result in mastery of that stage or failure. The individual must successfully master each stage of ego development in order to successfully move onto the next stage. Therefore, early stages must be mastered in order to successfully master later stages. If an individual moves onto the next stage of development without successfully mastering a previous stage, she will have a deficit in her ego development from the missed stage. A person may go back at anytime to master the stage not fully developed if they can become aware of such deficits. Therefore, an assumption of psychosocial theory would be if the divorce process interrupted ego development at the early stages, then later stages would also be impaired. This may be apparent in relational, emotional, and/or career difficulties (Erikson, 1960).

Research Questions

The following research questions were utilized in this study:

1. How do women describe their experience of parental divorce?
2. What meanings do women attach to their experience of parental divorce?

3. How do women describe the impact parental divorce has had on intimate relationships?

For purposes of this study, parental divorce was defined as the process that begins when a child realizes that one-parent will no longer live in the same house. It is assumed that this process has no ending but continues throughout these children's lives.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Each year one-third of all children living in the United States will experience parental divorce. For this reason, divorce is a major concern for family researchers and practitioners (Stevenson & Black, 1995). In the 1960s, the divorce rate went, from a steady incline to an unprecedented jump, followed by the 1970s and 1980s where a new trend emerged with the divorce rate rising to new heights. The rate of divorce since the 1990s and 2000s has stabilized, yet remains high (Marquardt, 2005; White, 1992). It is estimated that one million children per year will experience parental divorce (Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Children and Divorce

Reviewing trends in the research literature illustrates the social climate and how thinking about the impact of parental divorce has evolved. An early groundbreaking study on children and parental divorce was done by Nye (1957), who found that children of divorce appeared to be better adjusted than children in intact unhappy homes. The social implications of this study triggered researchers to investigate the effects of parental divorce on children further. In the 1950s and 1960s researchers were predominantly concerned with the male child's development in

father-absent homes. Researchers assumed that male children in father-absent homes would be worse off than male children with a male role model in the home. The assumption was also made that there were no males in these children's lives at all. The presumed negative effects of divorce were attributed to socialization deficits of growing up without the same-sex parent for the male child (Amato & Keith, 1991). This early research, done from a sociological perspective, was concerned with structural issues of parental absence, as well as with economic disadvantages and family conflict. These early investigations were eventually criticized for combining: single-parent homes and marital disruption, and ignoring the presence of males in the lives of children whose mothers are single or divorced (Gongla & Thompson, 1987).

Most of the early research came from the single family perspective—a fact that reflected researchers' preoccupation with the male child of divorce. The belief that gender differences exist, in how children experience parental divorce, can be traced to an early research focus on the male child in father-absent homes (Herzog & Sudia, 1973). An interest in gender became more prevalent in the 1970s, yet gender biases in the research went virtually unnoted throughout the decade.

The majority of researchers in the 1970s viewed divorce as a sociological and psychological deficit and sought to discover the maladjustment of children exposed to parental divorce. Many

researchers compared the personal adjustment of children living in two-parent households to children living with a divorced, single parent (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox & Cox 1985; Rosen, 1979). The overwhelming outcome of these studies indicated that after a two-year adjustment period, children with divorced parents were as well adjusted as children of non-divorced parents (Rosen, 1979), with male children showing traces of negative effects and female children showing none (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978).

Many studies focused on parental discord, finding divorce preferable to parental fighting for children (Hess & Camera, 1979; Raschke & Raschke, 1979). Investigations focusing on gender issues continued to support the claim that male children were more negatively impacted than female children and for a longer period of time (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979; Rutter, 1970). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1978) also found the male child to be less socially and cognitively mature than the female child into the second year after the divorce. Male children of divorce were reported to score lower on standardized tests than males from intact families or female children from intact or divorced family groups (Chapman, 1977).

In the 1970s, Wallerstein and Kelly (2000) conducted a groundbreaking longitudinal study of children and divorce. Using clinical interviews, they found that both male and female children suffered from parental divorce. Perhaps the most

significant aspect of this investigation was that it was one of the first to tap into the child's subjective, inner psychic world. Because Wallerstein and Kelly (2000) looked at internalized variables like self-esteem, they found that female children suffered greatly from parental divorce. Horowitz (1976) in a related study, suggested that the enduring effects of psychic trauma for children experiencing parental divorce may not show up for some time after the divorce, yet children's concept of safety and reliability in their world may be shattered. In the late 1970s, some researchers shifted the focus from externalizing behaviors within the two-year post-divorce adjustment period to an examination of long-term internalized symptomology (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This shift expanded thinking to include the questions of if and how female children are affected by parental divorce.

In the 1980s divorce was reconceptualized as a normative family transition and researchers began looking at interpersonal and adjustment variables as opposed to social deviant variables. As researchers began to consider internal processes as well as externalizing behaviors, inconsistencies emerged in the findings. Conclusions varied from the notion that children who experienced parental divorce recovered with little negative consequences (Edwards, 1987; Glenn, 1985) to the notion that psychosocial adjustment of children experiencing parental divorce is impaired (Krantz, 1988). Further complicating matters were mixed

conclusions across studies. Guidubaldi and Perry (1985) found male children from divorced families to have more maladaptive symptoms, inappropriate behavior, and unhappiness than children from intact families. They also reported female children as showing no negative outcomes from parental divorce. Other researchers found that both male and female children of divorce were worse off with respect to problem behavior, academic performance, and psychological distress than children who had not experienced parental divorce (Furstenberg & Seltzer, 1986; Marquardt, 2005). Furstenberg and Seltzer (1986) also found no difference in anxiety between children from divorced families and children from intact families. The inconsistencies in the outcomes may be attributed to the use of different methodologies and a research paradigm that does not capture the complexity of family process (Wallerstein, 1991).

In the late 1980s researchers considered the long-term effects of parental divorce for male and female children. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found adjustment problems for the male child at the onset of the divorce, but none at the five-year mark. Female children from divorced families were found to be more sexually active during puberty and into young adult years than girls from non-divorced families (Alpar, 2005; Wallerstein, 1991). In young adulthood, when female children were faced with their own intimate relationships, feelings of anxiety, betrayal, abandonment, concerns about commitment, and issues of love were

raised. These were not, however, reported for male children at this age. After the initial years of externalizing problem behavior, male children resumed typical development, whereas female children seemed unable to shake the identification of being "a child of divorce" (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, 2005).

The research literature in the 1990s resembled that of previous decades in that the findings are inconsistent as far as the effects divorce had on males and females. Researchers focusing on externalizing behaviors, such as school performance and problem behavior, still supported the assumption that male children were more affected by parental divorce than female children (Howell, Portes, & Brown, 1997; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995). Researchers who focused on feelings and attitudes about the family indicated that female children were negatively affected by parental divorce in enduring ways (McCabe, 1997; Wallerstein, 2005). Although research in the new millennium does document effects of parental divorce on children, reports on who suffers (boys or girls) and how they suffer may be dependent on the focus of study and methodology used. Researchers agree that the effects are enduring, but disagree as to the extent and on which variable (Amato, 2003).

Gender Differences in the Research

The belief that gender differences do exist in how children experience parental divorce, can be traced to the early

literature which focused on male children in father-absent homes. Early researchers assumed the male child would be affected more negatively by parental divorce than the female child. Most researchers who studied children and divorce between 1970 and 1980 measured externalizing behaviors, (i.e., school performance, delinquent behavior, and reported anti-social behavior) typically associated with males whose parents had divorced (Emery, 1982; Hetherington, 1979; Kurdeck, 1981).

Wallerstein (2000) found the male child's psychological adjustment to have deteriorated at the 18-month mark, whereas the female child's psychological adjustment greatly improved. Six years following the divorce, male children were also reported as having maladaptive symptoms, inappropriate behavior, and unhappiness, while female children only showed a higher internal locus of control (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985). More recent studies support the assumption that male children were more negatively affected by parental divorce as evidenced in problem behavior and poor academic performance (Howell, Portes, & Brown, 1997; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995).

Most studies on children and divorce employed a crisis model which identifies two years as the necessary period for adjustment after family disruption. During this two-year period male children from divorced families had much more difficulty performing in school, were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior, and exhibited more discipline problems than female

children (Demo & Acock, 1988). Female children measured on the same variables at the 18-month mark showed improvement in academic performance with little to no negative external behaviors (Zaslow, 1988). These results led researchers to conclude that female children by comparison with male children, were not affected negatively by parental divorce. Not until Wallerstein's (2000) longitudinal studies that utilized interviews to capture children's internal processes, did the data suggest that female children were also significantly affected by parental divorce.

Differences between male and female children's adjustment to parental divorce seemed to be related to a fundamental difference in how males and females deal with trauma. Males reportedly use externalizing behavior to deal with trauma and females internalized the trauma (Emery, 1982). Researchers have found that male children exhibit behavioral problems around the time of the legal divorce, whereas girls showed very little behavioral problems (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Kelly, 1993; Kurdek, Blisk & Siesky, 1981; Morrison & Cherlin, 1995). However, studies that measured internal variables at later developmental points indicate that female children internalize the trauma of divorce, and this trauma produced self-defeating consequences later in life (Wallerstein, 2005). Female children seemed to manifest more difficulties at different points in time (e.g., adolescence and adulthood) and on different variables (e.g., self-esteem and

feelings about intimate relationships) than did male children (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Zaslow, 1988).

According to Amato and Keith (1991), the short-term effects of divorce on children, especially females, may be more modest than the long-term effects. This phenomenon is known as the "sleeper effect" for female offspring of parental divorce. The sleeper effect, identified through clinical studies, suggested that girls initially adjust very well to parental divorce. It is not until their young adult years, when the developmental task is to establish intimate relationships, that anxiety and fears from the parental divorce surface (McCabe, 1997; Wallerstein, 2005). For the female child, parallels between the possibility of establishing her own family and what happened in her family-of-origin may surface. This triggers the fear that her relationship may fail just as her parent's marriage failed (Amato, 2003; Wallerstein, 2005).

Zaslow (1988) challenged the sleeper effect notion by suggesting that the measures traditionally used to determine effects of parental divorce on children may not capture the difficulties female children experience at the onset of parental separation. In fact, these young women may be experiencing emotional turmoil all along, yet their suffering has gone unnoticed by traditional research methodology.

Long-Term Effects

Research on the long-term effects of parental divorce on female offspring is riddled with inconsistencies. On measures of self-esteem, several researchers have found minimal differences between young adults who experienced parental divorce and those who had not, and no significant difference between male and female young adults (Amato & Keith, 1991; Long, 1987; Shook & Jurich, 1992). Researchers have found little difference between female children from divorced homes and female children from intact homes (Guidubaldi & Perry, 1985; Kasen et al., 1996). Other findings related to the long-term effects of parental divorce on female children indicate that age and developmental stage have the greatest impact on long-term adjustment (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1989).

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) found that preschool age children showed the least long-term distress from parental divorce, whereas Zill, Morrison, and Coiro (1993) found parental separation most distressing for preschoolers. It has been proposed that younger children have more distress over parental divorce because they are unable to understand family events and are more likely to blame themselves than older children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) found that female children in early latency at the time of parental divorce were doing poorly at the ten-year mark. Over half were reported as having

difficulty or faring poorly. They expressed sadness about the loss of a parent and they had idealized views of female children from intact families. They were doing well in school, yet reported by teachers as underachieving. The group of women that were of latency age at the time of parental divorce was seen as doing even worse. They reported being burdened by memories of unhappy times surrounding the divorce. Over half reported having difficulty making commitments in relationships and experiencing fears of betrayal (Wallerstein, 2000).

Adolescent girls showed similar effects, as far as heightened sexual activity, underachieving, and fears about intimate relationships. Females who experienced parental divorce had difficulty with each developmental stage they reached throughout their life. Allison and Furstenberg (1989) found long-term effects were more significant for the female child than for the male child. Long-term effects seemed to endure for these young women over time (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998; Wallerstein, 2000).

Longitudinal studies of women who experienced parental divorce indicated substantial disruptions in their ability to accomplish the developmental tasks of young adulthood. Even children who appear to be developmentally on task throughout their childhood may show major disruptions occurring at the young adult mark. Some women have shown difficulty in achieving psychological and economic independence, as well as maintaining

stable intimate relationships (Amato, 2003; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). Murphy (1991) found young women from divorced families experienced feelings of loneliness, showed negative attitudes towards marriage and, had difficulty progressing in courtship (Long, 1987). Young women from divorced families had difficulty forming and maintaining stable relationships, including marital relations (McLeod, 1991; Webster, Orbuch, & House, 1995). Amato (2003) found that adults who recalled unhappy parental marriages are more likely to suffer from psychological and marital problems than other adults.

Wallerstein (2000) followed children of parental divorce into adulthood and found that women in their early 30s harbored negative feelings about their parents' divorce, had difficulties in intimate relations, had recurring memories from the separation and feelings of anger, fear, and insecurity. These adult children also reported feeling emotionally abandoned and distressed by the divorce (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). Wallerstein's (2000) study revealed that adults, some 25 years after the divorce, still struggled with the cumulative effects from the trauma of parental divorce.

Children and Trauma

Clinical researchers have studied divorce as a life trauma that affects the psychic structuring of children. In the clinical literature, trauma has been associated with the clinical diagnosis, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is usually

associated with life-threatening stressors and life-altering events such as imprisonment in a concentration camp, as a prisoner of war, or incest. Psychic trauma occurs when individuals are exposed to events that are emotionally overwhelming and that leave the individual feeling helpless.

Researchers have suggested that parental divorce is a traumatic event, in which survivors resemble PTSD victims in the psychic defenses used to cope (Dreman, 1991; Wallerstein, 1991). The results of several studies indicate that parental divorce was more devastating to children than a natural disaster (Figley, 1985) or witnessing a homicide (Eth & Pynoos, 1985). Viinamaeke, et al. (1995) found that children who experienced the trauma of divorce before the age seven years had less mature coping strategies for handling mental trauma in their adult years.

Though research in this area is scarce, researchers acknowledge that parental divorce may have the impact of psychic trauma and that the effects may not be visible until long after the parental separation. Such trauma may destroy the individual's perception of safety and reliability in her world necessary for healthy development (Hetherington & Kelly 2002; Terr, 1981; Wallerstein, 1991). Thus, parental divorce as a trauma could facilitate the development of symptomology consistent with PTSD at later life stages.

Symptoms of Trauma

The study of trauma is a way to understand individual's systematic psychic organization of a traumatic event. Children of parental divorce have been identified as showing PTSD symptomology such as denial (Luepnitz, 1979), shame, anxiety, pessimism, depression, guilt, and recurrent memories of the event (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1988). The process begins with exposure to the event followed by involuntary intrusive memories. Individuals that suffer from PTSD organize their lives around the trauma, although the actual event may not be as devastating as the memories of the event (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1992). A critical element of what makes the event traumatic is the subjective interpretation by the victim of how threatening and helpless they feel. The meaning the victim attaches to the traumatic event determines its significance (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996).

The memory of the trauma is not integrated as part of a personal past but split off to exist independently of previous schemata (i.e., dissociated). Time does not fade or transform the memory (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). These memories are often associated with intense feelings of irretrievable loss, anger, betrayal, and helplessness. The memories and feelings may lie dormant until another traumatic event brings them to the conscious surface. Behavioral components often associated with PTSD are intrusive memories, compulsive re-exposure to the

trauma, psychic avoiding and numbing, inability to modulate arousal, distractibility, and stimulus discrimination (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). Other factors contributing to the development of PTSD are developmental stage, temperament, and interpersonal relationships. Clinical researchers suggest that the most damage occurs with young victims and that a key factor is the lack of secure attachment to a caregiver (Ornstein, 1996).

Need for Qualitative Research

In order to understand the female child's adjustment and experience of parental divorce, it is necessary that researchers explore children's internal processes (Wallerstein, 1991; Zaslow, 1988). These processes can be most readily accessed through qualitative methods. Through in-depth interviews, I have tried to take up Wallerstein's call (1991): "It is the inner world and human experience capturing the child's suffering, feelings, and experience that future researchers must focus on to systematically order, understand, and address the issues [of parental divorce] at all levels" (p. 359).

In qualitative research, truth is not viewed as a commonality shared among people. Truth is obtained from discovery of human experience that is lived and perceived by the informants, thus multiple realities exist (Krefting, 1991). A qualitative design will allow for women's subjective experience of parental divorce to be explored within the context of their adult lives. It is my hope to investigate the subjective meaning

of this experience for women, as well as to explore its contextual significance (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe women's experience of parental divorce using a qualitative research design.

Instrumentation

Naturalistic Paradigm

Qualitative research has no theory or paradigm to distinctly call its own (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The "naturalistic paradigm" has been adopted by qualitative researchers as an alternative to the positivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Assumptions of the naturalistic paradigm are as follows:

1. Multiple realities exist as opposed to a universal reality;
2. Researcher and informant interact and influence one another;
3. There is structural flexibility in time and context;
4. Cause and effect cannot be determined; and
5. Complete objectivity of researcher is impossible and not desired.

Some of the characteristics of the naturalistic inquiry identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) that will be implemented in this study are as follows:

1. the data are collected in natural settings;
2. the researcher is the instrument;
3. qualitative methods (in this case, interviews) of data collection are used
4. purposive sampling is implemented;
5. inductive analysis is used;
6. grounded theory will evolve, and
7. emergent design is used instead of a priori design.

Naturalistic inquiry emphasizes the bi-directional influences of context and phenomenon. Qualitative researchers assume that behavior goes beyond what the researcher can observe, thus subjective meanings are critical to qualitative methods (Krefting, 1991).

The design of a qualitative inquiry differs from that of the positivist design which pre-selects operational variables, determines a testable hypothesis and identifies specific instruments in advance. In qualitative research the topic is identified in advance, but the design of the study emerges from the research process and the researcher's response to the data (Patton, 1990).

The function of theory in qualitative and quantitative research is for explanation and prediction (Glaser & Struass, 1967). Qualitative researchers must decide if the phenomenon under investigation is better served from a theoretical framework to guide the study or if grounded theory was to be generated. Due to

the nature of this inquiry and the fact that little prior research has been conducted in this area, the goal was to generate grounded theory about women's experience of parental divorce.

Researcher as Instrument

In qualitative inquiry the researcher is the instrument for data collection, and the quality of the data obtained is dependent on the skill and person of the researcher (Patton, 1990). In this study the data were uncovered through the dynamic process of interviews between researcher and participant.

One danger of this dynamic data collection process is that the boundaries between the researcher's and participants' subjective worlds may become blurred. Techniques to guard against the researcher becoming enmeshed with the participant were used. These techniques included reflexive analysis, peer examinations and member checks (Krefting, 1991). Reflexive analysis was carried out by the researcher keeping a journal throughout the inquiry to capture personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of the investigation. Journaling helped in recording researcher bias and the presence of the researcher's subjective world in the investigation. Peer reviews were conducted, in which the researcher periodically had the interview data and the overall research process reviewed by doctoral committee members. Finally, member checks have been conducted where the researcher reviewed interview data with each participant for clarification and

feedback. The purpose of member checks was to ensure accuracy and to empower women's interpretation of their lives primacy.

Validity and Reliability

Conventional quantitative techniques assessing validity and reliability do not apply to qualitative inquiry. Strategies specific to qualitative inquiry, therefore, have been identified to evaluate credibility, transferability, and dependability.

Credibility

Internal validity assumes the latent variable is in existence with multiple realities (Krefting, 1991). Credibility is concerned with how accurately multiple realities are represented in the data. In qualitative inquiry it is important to identify patterns, themes, and values in the data. Credibility requires that a sufficient amount of time is spent submersed in the gathering of data to reach saturation or repetition of such patterns (Kefting, 1991).

Strategies to enhance credibility that were utilized in this study included prolonged engagement, reflexivity, peer examinations, and member checks. Prolonged engagement requires that the researcher spend extended time with the participants gathering data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This strategy builds rapport and helped the researcher identify data that might be based on social desirability (Krefting, 1991). Rapport with informants builds trust and may enhance the disclosure of the informants. This may provide the researcher with sensitive

information that may not come from brief interactions. While prolonged engagement enhances credibility, it may also increase researcher bias; therefore, reflexivity, peer examinations, and member checks have also been implemented. Peer examinations have been conducted with doctoral committee members and member checks have included reviews of the data by the participants.

Transferability

External validity refers to the ability to generalize the data to a larger population. In qualitative research this is not the primary objective. Rather the goal of qualitative research is to explore a phenomenon and provide rich descriptions of the experience (Krefting, 1991). Qualitative methods refer to transferability as the ability to represent the experience of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability can be enhanced through strategies such as nominated samples where a panel of judges helps select the representative sample of the population under study. Other strategies include conducting demographic comparisons, where participants provide demographic background so that readers can make comparisons for transferability and detailed descriptions of context, investigation process, and methods of analysis help in the replication of the study (Krefting, 1991).

This study explored and described the experiences of a particular group of women. Therefore, it was not appropriate to generalize the findings to all women whose parents divorced when

they were children. While this study was intended for descriptive purposes, some of the strategies for transferability were used.

Dependability

Quantitative research assumes one unchanging reality, where as qualitative research believes in multiple realities. This changes the concept of reliability in quantitative research to that of dependability for qualitative researchers. Qualitative researchers look for range of experience and seek to understand variation. Strategies to enhance dependability have included providing detailed descriptions of procedures, analysis, and interpretation, so the logic of the decisions for the study can be followed. Formal audits with a methodologist, the doctoral committee chairperson, were conducted on a regular basis to examine the research process. Also, the researcher utilized the code-recode strategy. The data were coded, then a period of two weeks lapsed and the researcher recoded the data checking for discrepancies against the first coding.

Procedures

Participants

To interpret women's subjective experiences of their parents' divorce process, a qualitative design using purposeful sampling was conducted. Snowball sampling where informants provided names of other possible participants was also used to get information rich cases in a short period of time. Network

techniques, where professionals provided names of possible cases were used.

Criterion sampling is a method of selecting cases fitting a predetermined criterion. Women selected for this study were childless, between the ages of 25 and 35, whose parents began the divorce process while the women were between the ages of 3 and 6 years old. The age boundaries were determined from Erikson's (1960) psychosocial developmental theory. According to Erikson, 25 and 35 are proposed as the age range when individuals should have defined relationships and career choices.

Because of the lack of research on the effects of parental divorce on children from racially diverse populations and the fact that the sleeper effect was identified in studies of middle class white children, this study intentionally recruited participants consistent with the existing literature.

The sample was comprised of white middle-class women who came from diverse family backgrounds and relationship preferences.

Data Collection

While Patton (1990) identified several different interview structures, this study used a face-to-face "informal conversational interview" format (Patton, 1990). This method allows informants to speak freely and identify important aspects of the experience for themselves. A general interview guide was used to identify specific areas to be covered (see Appendix A). Wording and sequencing of the questions were not rigid so as to

allow for a more natural conversation. The strength of this format is that it empowers the informants and lets them describe relevant issues; the weakness of this strategy is that the data may be difficult to converge and analyze (Patton, 1990).

The time and place of the interview were determined by the women. Demographic questionnaires were mailed to each informant one week prior to her first interview. A second interview was conducted for the purpose of follow-up questions. Interviews ran in time from 1-2 hours. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher immediately following the interview. Each woman was given the option of choosing a pseudonym to protect her identity.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed using Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory method which assumes that theory is generated from the data. This means that concepts come not only from the data but are involved in the process of research as they are systematically worked out in the research process. The decision to utilize grounded theory method is based on the inductive nature of this exploration and the lack of substantive research representing this area of inquiry; (i.e.; women's experience of parental divorce). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) grounded theory method is called for if the research question involves an experience and/or a phenomenon.

Grounded theory involves generating theory closely tied to the data where collection and analysis occur simultaneously. This simultaneous process utilized the constant comparative method of data collection and analysis. Constant comparative method allows the researcher to generate theory that is integrated, consistent, and closely tied to the data while being systematic enough to allow for future quantitative testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To follow this method of analysis the data were coded and analyzed following each interview. "Open coding" was used to compare patterns and themes and group them into tentative categories. Next "axial coding" was used to help identify relationships between the categories. Then "selective coding" was utilized to identify core categories that represent components of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Finally, an important part of the data analysis process was the researcher's field journal. Theoretical memos were written to aid the researcher in the recall of important information from the interviews. The journal helped to explore researcher bias and to enhance theoretical sensitivity (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Journal notes were written after each interview to capture the most immediate reflections of the researcher. Theoretical memos aided the researcher in recognizing categories and relationships between them in order to build theory.

Limitations and Contributions

This study was an exploratory study of adult women's experience of parental divorce. The use of qualitative methods was beneficial in capturing process and subjective experiences necessary for understanding the human condition from the insiders perspective.

A limitation of this study, from the quantitative perspective, was the lack of generalizability. Due to a small non-representative sample the results are not generalizable to a larger population. However, this is not considered a weakness, but a strength from the qualitative perspective. Qualitative studies are concerned with gaining access and understanding into the subjective experience of the participants where they determine relevant areas of exploration. Although the results of this study may not apply to all women from divorced families, the stories presented can further knowledge in this area to benefit clinicians and other professionals working in the area of divorce.

CHAPTER 4

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this study was to examine the subjective experience of six women's accounts of parental divorce. This chapter presents a profile of each of the participants in an attempt to introduce them as individuals and describe the unique story of their parents' divorce experience.

The Sample

The sample consisted of six women between the ages of 25-31 years in age. All of the women's parents began the divorce process when they were between the ages of 3-6 years of age. For a demographic profile of the sample see Table 1.

One of the participants has a high school education. Five of the women have college degrees. Four of the women have masters degrees in psychology, social work or education.

Five of the women of the study described having successful enjoyable careers. One of the women would like to eventually go back to college. Five of the women are in the helping professions and one works in public relations. Three of the women work with at-risk youth. One is in mental health. One is a conference coordinator and one works in the field of Eastern arts.

Socioeconomically, the women were middle to upper-middle class. Their socioeconomic status was influenced by their

education background and their combined family income. They all own their homes and none mentioned money as a stressor in their current living situations.

As described in the sample criteria, all women have been in a long-term relationship for one year or more. However, at the completion of the interview process five of the women were separated from their partners.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

| Name | Age | Age at Separation | Full Biological Siblings | Relationship Status | Highest Degree Earned | Occupation |
|----------|-----|-------------------|---|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Angelina | 30 | 6 | 0 | Dating/Living Together | B.S. | Yoga Instructor |
| Lynne | 31 | 6 | 1 younger brother/ 1 older brother & sister | Life Partner | M.A. | Substance Abuse Counselor |
| Melissa | 31 | 4 | 1 younger brother | Life Partner | M.ED. | Adventure Based Counselor |
| Karen | 28 | 3 | 0 | Married | M.A. | Conference Coordinator |
| Katie | 30 | 3 | 1 older brother | Married | MSW | Social Worker |
| Sue | 25 | 5 | 1 younger brother | Married | High School | Clerk |

Angelina

Angelina chose to meet in my office for the interview. My office has a comfortable living room-like setting with a couch and a couple of chairs. Angelina's appearance was casual yet she

was neatly dressed. She was raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where her family still resides. She believed she was about six when her parents separated. Angelina is the only child of both her biological parents. She is currently living with her significant other. They are not married. Angelina had been married once before. That marriage ended in a divorce. Thirty years old, a college graduate, and a yoga instructor for three years, Angelina had a warm and open presence. The experience of her parents' divorce was emotionally difficult and life altering.

Angelina began her story by describing her parents fighting in front of her. She felt like she was an object as her parents referenced her in their fight. She recalled, "It was confusing because it was loud and I was very scared and that was the first memory I had. I was in the middle. I actually remember standing in the middle of them." Her father moved out and she stated, "I was left with my mom."

As an adult, Angelina learned that the divorce was sparked by her father's affair with another woman. Angelina's mother drank heavily after her father moved out. She was very angry and she began to work all the time. Angelina's mother left her with a nanny or her grandparents.

Angelina's relationship with her mother deteriorated after the separation. She took her anger out on Angelina. She recalled her mother constantly bad-mouthing her father. Angelina's memories of her mother during this period were characterized by

anger and distance. As she grew older, Angelina became even more distant from her mother. Angelina established relationships outside of the home to escape her mother. Angelina felt her mother was jealous of her love for her father and did her best to turn Angelina against him.

Angelina's father gained her sympathy by acknowledging the turbulence with her mother and his guilt for leaving her in the situation with her mother. Yet, he never attempted or offered a different arrangement for her to live in. She recalled, "I wanted to see him more than he came to visit. In my childhood he didn't really make a point to come and see me, I had a lot of grief because of that."

Angelina's father was involved with other women and missed his days to be with her. He was, however the parent most emotionally available to her. He and her cat seemed to be the only ones there for her. Her father said things she needed to hear, but his behavior was erratic. She often felt abandoned. Angelina's father created no space for her to be in his life. He remarried a woman with several older children. This woman told Angelina that she did not like children and would not talk to her. Angelina never had her own room in her father's home. To this day her father's wife is never around when Angelina visits.

Angelina's parents' ability to co-parent was strained at best. She felt as if she was "a pain in the ass for them to have

to schedule around." Her mother was so angry with her father that they could not communicate effectively about Angelina's care.

Angelina acknowledged that she got involved with boys to get out of her mother's house and have emotional support. She used sex as a way to keep boys from leaving her. Angelina explained tearfully, "I was just lonely and wanted someone there for me." She had two long-term relationships before she got married. She had an affair in the marriage and divorced after five years. Angelina began a relationship with her current boyfriend three weeks after leaving her husband. She is now in the process of leaving him after four years.

Angelina believed her parents' divorce significantly affected her life. "I can't count on anyone being there for me, I can only depend on me to make me happy." She has never felt that there has been a space for her with another person either emotionally or physically. "My mom was too angry to let me get close and my dad never made space for me in his life or home." Angelina saw divorce as a viable option. She did not feel she had to stay in a bad situation. Of the impact of her parents divorce she concluded, "I want to say divorce is no big deal and doesn't affect anyone, but the reality is it absolutely changed me."

Lynne

Lynne chose to do the interview at my home so she could come to a larger town for a change. We sat in a small private sitting room for the interview. Lynne was an attractive 31-year-old. She

was neatly yet casually dressed. Lynne was the youngest daughter of four children with an older brother and sister and a younger brother. She was raised in a small mountain community. She believed she was about six when her parents separated. She lives with her life partner of several years in a home they own. Lynne is a master's level substance abuse counselor. Her parents' divorce was riddled with uncertainty and abuse that came in the wake of the separation.

As we began our discussion, Lynne was eager to tell her story. She talked for many minutes with minimal questions from me. It was as if she had been waiting for this opportunity and knew exactly what she needed to say.

Lynne had selective cognitive memories of her parents' separation. What she remembered she gave great details of, however, she had many blind spots. It seemed very difficult for her to retrieve emotional memories. She said she felt "confused" about the events.

The first recollection Lynne had of there being something wrong in her parents' marriage was a fight they had one evening when she saw her mom standing over her father "fussing him out." She recalled, later that night, being carried out of the house in her sleep to the home of a family friend. She never went back to live in her parent's home again. Lynne now knows that her father was having an affair. Lynne and her siblings saw the woman drive by her parent's home. At the time Lynne felt confused, "I just

didn't understand all of that." No one ever told her why she and her siblings left their family home.

Lynne's mother and siblings lived with family friends before getting their own apartment a block away from her father's house. Her mother wanted nothing from her father, except the kids. She went back to work and struggled financially. Lynne's older sister took responsibility for raising the younger siblings.

Lynne had no memories of her feelings during these events, only her behaviors. She recalled walking past her apartment and going to her father's house, "I considered that to be my home because all my toys were still there." Her father would feed her dinner and send her back to the apartment. Although her sister yelled at her for going to her fathers', Lynne said, "I was daddy's little girl. What ever I wanted I got and if I got hurt he would get onto my older brother and sister."

Lynne's parents' divorce took on new meaning when she asked her father to come and get her:

I was fighting with my mom and wanted to go live with my daddy. I packed a paper bag and called him crying to come get me. He started to stutter and said let me talk to your mom. I knew then he wasn't coming to get me.

This incident brought the reality of her father's commitment out in the open, "I think that's when I first realized I couldn't go see him when I wanted, I was kinda hurt. I think that's why I was crying. I thought he would come get me when I wanted and when

I realized it wasn't that way it was kinda hurtful (long pause).” After this incident, the relationship became more distant, “when we went to visit him it was dark and cold like a shell.” Eventually Lynne saw him just on holidays with long periods of no contact at all.

Lynne's memories of her life between first and sixth grade are centered on her relationship with her father. When her father remarried, Lynne became responsible for integrating her stepbrother into her school. He was, “the kind of kid other kids didn't take to” and she resented being responsible for him. She also recalled thinking her father was “self-centered.” She also remembered how badly he treated his own mother, the grandmother Lynne loved dearly. By sixth grade she had very little to do with her father. “There were times when we needed things from him and he wasn't there. He's just mean, he's evil. There needs to be a diagnosis for evil.”

Interestingly, Lynne's memories shifted to her mother's remarriage. Lynne liked her step-dad before they got married. “We kinda had a ritual of family night. He'd take me, my brother, and mom out to dinner. So I thought he was the cats meow.” This changed the day he married Lynne's mother. “Like black and white,” Lynne paused, reflecting on the first day after the wedding, “He picked me and my brother up from school and started “fussin” me out. When we got home he was going to spank me. I ran out of the house and he chased me. I think he blamed me for a lot

of stuff I didn't do." As Lynne told story after story of his verbal and physical abuse, she spoke in a matter of fact way with little or no affect.

Lynne's step-dad got the family in deeper and deeper financial trouble. Her mother hid what was happening from the kids. Lynne recalled coming home from school as their car was being repossessed. She was embarrassed.

The situation finally blew up when Lynne smarted off to her step-dad:

He came after me and that's the first time that I knew if he got hold of me he would have punched me. I was out of control. My mom called my big brother to come over. The next day at school we got a call to come home. And my mom without us knowing, got an apartment and moved us out in a few hours while my step-dad was hunting. My step-dad wasn't allowed to come near us. She [mom] thought he was gonna kill us, well me.

Lynne's biological father was not around during this time. As she spoke, her voice tone expressed the emotions imbedded between her words. Our conversation shifted to Lynne's beliefs and feelings about intimate relationships and her facial muscles softened and her voice became childlike. Lynne said she had "lots of acquaintances and few close friends." She tries to enter relationships "cautiously" because she has difficulty with trust. "People have ulterior motives or maybe are not what they seem."

While Lynne has dealt with this issue with her current partner, she was very honest about her fears and insecurities in relationships. She will always have doubts, when someone tells her they love her. She fears that loved ones will leave her, and she cannot share deep emotions or tears. She saw her parents' divorce as a factor in her relationship:

Trusting that they love me, you know love. I know that comes from old stuff. So yeah it's [divorce] affected my relationships. That's been the big issue in buying a house. It's been a struggle with trust for me. No back door.

Melissa

Melissa chose to meet with me at my home. Upon arrival, she was casually dressed and visibly anxious. She acted somewhat anxious, closed, and standoffish. For the most part, Melissa grew up in a small southern university town. Melissa has one full biological older brother, one stepsister, and one half-sister. She was four years old when her parents separated. Melissa lived in a small town in the mountains with her partner of several years. She has a master's degree and works as an adventure-based counselor for at-risk kids. Melissa's narrative of her parents' divorce is the backdrop for her life of abuse and neglect

As I began the interview, I soon realized that I could not follow my interview guide with Melissa. Her responses were "yes/no" and "I don't know." Melissa said she had no memories

before the age of ten. Together, we struggled to find a flow of conversation that would carry us where we both needed to go.

Melissa's memory was, perhaps, the most interesting aspect of her interview. She did not have memories of her parents together before the separation or after the split. She had no memory of any aspect of their divorce. Yet, her family moved around a lot and she remembered every street name she ever lived on and every school she ever attended. While she recalled no emotional memories of the separation, as she talked about it she was visibly disturbed. She could not give me enough of a description of her mother for me to get a sense of who she was as a person. Melissa simply said that she and her mother were never close. By contrast, she described her father in detail.

Melissa was never told why her parents divorced, however in retrospect, she believed her father was an alcoholic. She remembered him beating her brother. Melissa paused for a long time and then described how her father sexually abused her. When she visited him, he exposed himself and fondled her. She had vague memories of other uncomfortable acts. The abuse continued until she was a teen and stopped him. She told no one about his behavior until much later. She described her family as very closed, "they don't talk about things." The sexual abuse consumed her experience of the divorce.

Melissa remained distant from her mother and has not spoken to her father since 1990. Her mother remarried when she was young

and Melissa loved her step-dad dearly. He has been the one person she has connected to.

In thinking about the effects of her parents' divorce, Melissa remembered feeling like her world was split between her mother's house and her father's house. There was never any talk about or connection between the houses. Because her mother had to work, Melissa had to assume household chores she thought a kid should not have to do. "If I start talking about this stuff I feel like I'll start crying and never stop, so I never cry." She admitted to staying closed off about emotional matters. "I just don't want to look at it [divorce] at all. I don't ever want to remember anything about it [divorce]."

Karen

Karen came to my office for the interview. She was neatly dressed and seemed eager and enthusiastic about doing the interview. We sat across from one another in a living room setting. Karen is a twenty-eight-year old who works as a conference coordinator at the local university. She has a bachelors degree and no plans, at this time, for any further education. Both of her biological parents have their PhD's. Karen grew up in Oregon until she went to college at Tulane and then moved to a small southern college town. She is the only child of her biological parents. Karen has been married for five years and her spouse is currently a student at the local university.

Karen was three years old when her parents separated. At that time they lived in the same town she now lives in. Karen had no memory of prior marital problems between her parents. She and her mother came home one day and her father had a bunch of household goods packed in boxes that were sitting in her playroom. He said he was leaving and a friend came to help him move out. Karen did not remember exactly what her father told her, but she remembered crying. As she recalled that moment, she cried, "He told me something about he wasn't going to live with us but he would live nearby and I could still see him." Karen had difficulty completing her thoughts and she seemed confused. Her parents never talked with her about the divorce and she did not understand what was happening. She continued to cry and remember, "It didn't make sense not to have my dad live with us. My parents were both always there for me." Not until Karen was an adult did her parents tell her, on separate occasions, that her father had cheated on her mother and that was the reason for the divorce.

When Karen turned five, her mother was admitted into a Ph.D. program across the country in Oregon. Karen stopped by her father's apartment to say goodbye. The emotion she felt about that day surprised her. "It's weird because I haven't talked about this ever and it's weird because it still upsets me."

Karen has fond memories of childhood in Oregon. Karen felt involved in every aspect of her mother's Ph.D. program, and she

had a lot of fun going through that process with her. Involved in many activities and sports, Karen felt she had a rich fun-filled childhood. The divorce made her relationship with her mother stronger. They had to rely on one another. As Karen talked about her relationship with her mother she began to cry. She saw her mother as extremely strong. Karen respected her and wanted to be more like her.

Karen's father stayed as involved as possible in her life initially. She talked to him at least once a week and he sent her cards and letters. She spent every Christmas and summer with her father. As a child, she idolized her father. Looking back on the relationship as an adult, Karen worked hard to please her father and make him happy. She felt like she was the center of his life until her step-mom came into the picture at the end of her high school years.

Karen recalled an abrupt change in her father. He ignored her and yelled at her at times. This changed in his behavior caused her to seek therapy, "That's when I started seeing my dad for who he really was." When he decided to marry, he and his wife-to-be told Karen at the last minute. She was not involved or invited to their wedding. As she talked about these events her voice trembled. She acknowledged having a great deal of pain and anger toward her father and step-mom. Karen said she now has a good relationship with her father and step-mom. She has never talked with him about this difficult time.

By contrast, Karen's mother began dating and married a man with custody of his two sons. All the children took part in the wedding. Karen loves her step-dad. She calls him dad, and she loves her two brothers. They all are very close and Karen referred to her mother and step-dad as her parents. She said her parents have worked very hard to make the family right.

Karen's biological parents remained friends and able to co-parent her. There was no animosity between the step-parents and her biological dad had no problem with her referring to her Step-dad as "dad." Karen felt lucky that her parents were able to work together so well.

Karen did not feel she has negative attitudes about relationships or commitment from the divorce. She did admit that in her early romantic relationships she felt she had worked hard to please partners, as she had done with her father. Her marriage is at a difficult place right now. Divorce has taught her that she does not have to stay stuck in a relationship that is not working. Because her mother and step-dad modeled a successful second marriage she felt that starting over can be a good thing in some cases.

Katie

Katie is a delightful thirty-year-old. She arrived at my office dressed casually, yet professional. She was very excited about the interview and eager to talk. Katie was three years old when her parents separated. She is the youngest child. She has a

biological brother two years older. Katie has been married for three years. Her spouse is an attorney and they reside in a small liberal university town in the South where Katie grew up. She has a masters degree in social work and is currently a school social worker. She enjoys her job but feels overwhelmed at times. Katie felt her parents' divorce was as good as it could be, yet it affected who she is as a person.

She had few memories of her parent's separation. She recalled her parents fighting in the kitchen, while she hid behind her brother. They were fighting over a grilled cheese sandwich, and for the rest of her childhood, Katie thought her parents divorced because of a grilled cheese sandwich.

Katie felt lucky that she was so young when her parents separated in she had no memories of her father moving out, only that her parents did not live together and that was the way it had always been. While Katie expressed no concern for her self during that transition, she tearfully recalled the time her mother, brother and she dropped off her father at his apartment. She worried about the intense sadness he must have felt. She said, "It is so achingly sad to me." She shared how what was so "ok" and normal for her was so devastating for her friends whose parents got divorced later in life. Katie seemed to feel guilty for not being traumatized by her parents' divorce. Perhaps, she did have some sadness and was only able to feel her emotions through the pain of others.

There were no major upheavals in Katie's life after her parents' divorce. Katie, her brother, and mother stayed in the same house, while her father got an apartment in the same town. She and brother visited her father every other weekend. She always felt loved by her father but she admitted that he did not know what to do with two kids especially a girl. During her visits with her father, Katie and her brother wondered around the construction company that he worked for. Both parents attended her activities and events. Until she was eight, everything was "just kinda normal."

Katie's father remarried when she was eight years old. He married a woman with three older children, two boys and one girl. This woman did not like girls and only her son's lived with her and Katie's father. Things changed for Katie emotionally after this marriage. When Katie and her brother stayed with their step-mom, she made it clear that she did not like children. Katie overheard a fight between her father and her step-mom, where her step-mom said she did not want Katie around. Katie became upset and cried when she talked about this recollection.

Pain from this time was still fresh and intense. At the age of 13, Katie chose not to go to see her father for visits any more. She expressed a concern for how painful this decision must have been for everyone else involved, however, she does not mention how painful it was for her. Her father never held it against her and they talked by phone every week. After she became

old enough to drive, she and her father met frequently for dinner.

Katie claimed that her relationship with her mother was good, despite some difficult areas. Katie's mother hated her father. Her mother has always and still does bad mouth her father. This was difficult for Katie when she was a child. Although, she and her mother were close, in that they did everything together, Katie's mother was not emotionally available. Katie feared that if she didn't do everything just right her mother would leave like her father did. Katie explained, "I felt like if I wasn't good enough I wouldn't get people's love and attention and I would be on my own."

Katie worked hard for her mother's approval. Katie idolized her mother, she wanted to be like her. Katie's impression of her mother changed when she began a relationship with a married man. Katie resented her for the secrecy of the affair. The man has since divorced his wife. He and Katie's mother have been together for twelve years. They all get along good now. As Katie stated so well, "It wasn't the actual divorce that was so hard, but the relationships that came after it."

Over the years Katie has put together her own understanding of why her parents' divorce. One big realization was Katie's perception that she felt her mother never wanted to be married. Even now she and her life partner are not married. As Katie reflected on how the divorce impacted her own ideas of

commitment, she said that she has internalized some of her mother's fears about commitment. Katie had negative ideas about what commitment means, nevertheless, she did choose to be married. She shared that during two years of marriage, she had two major panic attacks which she had never had before. All those feelings about commitment and not being good enough hit her squarely in the face. Luckily those experiences helped her learn that she did not have to be perfect for someone to love her.

Because of her parent's and grandparent's divorce, Katie still sees relationships as disposable:

I realized more divorce stuff as an adult than I did as a kid. It has really affected me and who I have become. And no matter how much I discount it and say it's no big deal, it still affects who I became. When you grow up in the mess of divorce, it is so much about what happens after the papers are signed. It is about how people function in relationships.

Of the impact of divorce on her outlook, Katie explained:

I am ten weeks pregnant, and I have no idea how to function in a two-parent family. That's a funny way it's affected me. I don't have any example of how two loving people work in a relationship. I have no idea how to have a family.

Sue

Sue met me in my office. She arrived from work so she was dressed casually and professional. Sue was an attractive twenty-

five-year old woman. Sue was five years old when her parents' separated. She is the oldest child. She had one younger brother who had the same biological parents, and a half sister on her father's side with one step-brother. On her mother's side she had five step-siblings.

Sue has been married for one and a half years. She is currently separated, "trying to work things out." She worked as a clerk for a local mental health agency. Sue's experience of her parents' divorce was not terribly traumatic, yet she believed it had greatly impacted her current relationship.

Sue had no traumatic memory of her parents' separation. She remembered her mother sitting her and her brother down and explaining that they were going to move into their grandparent's home. Sue was excited but concerned as to when she would see her father. The only emotion Sue remembered about the separation was the sadness she felt when a friend mentioned seeing her father crying at a local restaurant. To this day, Sue is not clear why her parent's separated. Her mother claimed she could not trust her father with money and she wanted a way out of the marriage. Sue overheard her father talking about a co-worker her mother dated shortly after the separation. Sue's mother denied having an affair, however the reasons for leaving her father remain vague.

Sue's parents did not argue or have parenting conflicts that she could recall. After the separation, she saw her father every other weekend and on Tuesdays. Her mother worked full-time and

she and her brother went to a daycare after school. After moving out of her grandparent's home, they lived in a two-bedroom home. Sue's father was a minister and he lived in huge church home. Sue and her brother always slept in her father's room on his floor when they visited. Sue felt totally comfortable at both her parent's homes until her father remarried.

In fifth grade, Sue's father remarried and there was a confrontation on her father's wedding night. Sue explained:

To this day my step-mom and I don't get along because of the first night of their marriage. We always slept in my dad's room and she told us we couldn't. So my dad told us this will be the last night. I think we [Sue and her step-mom] were in a power struggle. I got moved to the other end of the house.

Sue lost her place in her father's life. She felt displaced and the situation quickly deteriorated from there.

Sue described her step-mom as verbally abusive. "She would scream and yell. And she would fly off the handle. My mom and dad don't yell." The difference in Sue's relationship with her father after his marriage was like night and day. He was no longer interested in having fun with Sue and her brother after he remarried. Sue felt she got the brunt of the step-mom's mistreatment and verbal abuse. "She would make me scrub the toilets and stuff. My brother or her son never had to do any of that."

Sue's step-mom's mistreatment eventually had a negative impact on her relationship with her father.

She would act in front of him like we were this happy family. She would come in my room close the door and yell at me when he wasn't there. It was very crazy and messed up. After that I would avoid going to my dad's and I know it hurt him but I didn't want to be around her.

Sue never told her father about her step-mom's behavior because she did not want to cause trouble in the marriage.

Sue's mother remarried when she was in high school. The transition into that step-family was a natural progression for Sue. "We had grown up with him so it wasn't any shock. When we moved into his house we had already spent a lot of time there and we all had our own rooms. I didn't feel displaced." Sue continued to have a good relationship with her step-dad and his five children. They all got along and they enjoyed the times they all could be together.

Sue felt that her difficulties with trust and intimacy in her marriage stem from her parent's divorce. She felt she could never trust them with her emotions and this carried over into her marriage.

Sue believed that her ideas about commitment have been shaped by her parents' divorce. Before marriage she had the mind set that she would never get a divorce. Now that she is married when things became difficult she wants to "run" from this

uncomfortable situation. She identified with her mother whom Sue believed wanted a way out. "I have this need inside to run." Because she never dealt with her parents' divorce, Sue felt that she was left with unexpressed and unresolved emotions and the coping skill of running.

CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe six women's experience of parental divorce, with a focus on their internal states and relational dynamics. For this investigation of the subjective experiences and internal processes, a qualitative design was most appropriate. The assumptions of the naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were adopted in this exploration of women's narratives. Due to the inductive nature of this study and the lack of substantive research in this area, data were analyzed using the grounded theory method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The basic component of grounded theory method is to generate theory most closely tied to the data where collection and analysis occurs simultaneously. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the results of this study and present a summary of the emerging themes from these findings.

Interpretation of Themes

A constant-comparative analysis of the data gathered from the interviews reveals the following themes of; lack of communication, losses, exposure to abuse, as well as views on future relationships emerged. This section explores similarities and differences among the women's experiences concerning these themes.

Lack of Communication

Structure and stability are two elements important for a child's healthy emotional development. When changes occur, as many do during parental divorce, one of the most important jobs of the child's caregiver is to explain the changes occurring and how they will directly affect the child's life. How the parents communicate to the child about what is happening in her life can be one of the most important elements in reducing the child's anxiety. All of the women reported a lack of parental communication about what was occurring during the divorce process. This created a great deal of emotional stress.

Angelina's memories of separation began with a fight between her parents where she remembered standing like an object in the middle of their fight:

I remember my parents were arguing, my mother instigated it and my dad was like I really don't want to talk about this in front of her. And it was confusing because it was very loud and I was scared. . . and that was my first memory.

Angelina's father communicated to her that he would be leaving, that he loved her, and that he could not get along with her mother. He also communicated his guilt about leaving her with her mother. Angelina recalled:

I never understood. There was never anything I could do and I knew that. Like I couldn't talk to my mom about my dad. I couldn't talk to my dad about my mom but there was a lot of

pain there. It was hard for me to figure out what was going on. Like I never knew when they got divorced or when that changed. Like no one sat me down, I don't think they had a clear idea about what was going on, it was chaos.

Angelina lived between the anger of her mother and a father, so riddled with guilt that there was no room for her own emotional pain and confusion. She had no understanding of why her parents separated, until her father told her about his affair.

Lynne also told a story of the abrupt change in her family and the confusion she felt:

One night my mom and dad got to arguing and I remember him sitting in a blue chair and my mom was standing over him fussing. She [mom] asked my sister to take me back of the house. I went back and fell asleep. I remember kind of waking up. Somebody was carrying me. I woke up the next day and we were at mom's friends. . . I don't remember anyone sitting down and talking to me. It was like we were at home one day and then we weren't. . . It was confusing cause she [mom] didn't explain. I didn't know my dad had a girlfriend. I didn't understand all of that.

Lynne was carried out of her home one night, never to return. There was no explanation given and she had no idea of what would come next. Lynne's mother repeated this pattern of abruptly leaving a relationship with her next husband. She moved the kids out of their home when they were at school with no

warning. That life could change with no warning was a reality that permeated Lynne's life.

Melissa has no memory of the incident that provoked her parents' separation and divorce:

Back then I had questions like, my friend's parents are in the same house why aren't mine? But I can't remember talking to anyone or even asking, mama where's daddy or daddy why doesn't mama live here. I mean just the reason why they got divorced I'm not even 100% that I know.

Karen tells a story similar to Lynne's, in that she had no prior knowledge of her parents' plans to separate.

I never knew they were having problems. My mom and I came home one day and dad had all this house stuff packed in boxes in our living room. He basically told me he was leaving. And, his friend came and helped him move.

Karen cried when she recalled her father telling her he was not going to live with them anymore. "All I remember was crying and I don't really remember what he said. Something about he wasn't going to live with us but he would live near by and I could see him." Karen continued to cry, as she talked about the confusion she felt as to what was happening. "They never talked about it with me. So, I still think about it. . . I never knew what was going to happen. At that age it didn't make sense not to have my dad live there." Karen never knew, as a child, why her parent's separated. When she became an adult, her father told her

he had cheated on her mother and that they never should have gotten married. Karen responded to this with tears and the question, "What about me?"

Katie was two and a half when her parents separated and her only memory of that process was of her parents having a fight in the kitchen over how her mother made a grilled cheese sandwich. She remembered hiding behind her big brother. Katie has no memory of her father moving out or any conversation about the divorce. As a child, she believed they divorced over a grilled cheese sandwich. Her parents never talked about why they divorced. She recalled, "It was so ingrained as that's the way it was, no one ever talked about it." Even now that she is an adult, Katie's parents refuse to discuss the reasons for their divorce. Katie has pieced together what she believed to be true, but still has a great deal of confusion.

Sue remembered being shocked by her parents' separation because they never fought. She knows now there were two fights but when the divorce was happening she remembered thinking, "If they are going to divorce they should have more fights." Sue did have a memory of her mother sitting her and her brother down and telling them that they were going to live with their grandparents and that their father was going to stay in the family home. Both her mother and father said to her and her brother that the divorce was not their fault. Sue did not recall having any emotion surrounding this.

Sue remained confused as to why her parents separated. To this day, neither parent has given her an explanation as to why the marriage did not work. Sue's mother said she could not trust Sue's father with money issues but this seems vague. Sue recalled a man being involved with her mother shortly after the separation. Sue's mother has denied any kind of affair. This idea of her mother's relationship with another man made Sue uncomfortable.

In summary, all of the women still have a great deal of confusion about why their parents divorced when they look at the process from a child's perspective. As adults, Angelina, Lynne, and Karen cognitively knew that their fathers were involved with other women, yet emotionally they still felt confused. They reported feeling confused and sad at the time of physical separation.

Losses

The experience of loss is subjective and often difficult to define. The women in this study uniquely depicted the loss they experienced through a child's mind. Their descriptions captured the tangible and intangible loss to a child in the midst of parental divorce.

Some of the most vivid expressions of loss were in their material external world: home, school, toys. It is important to understand the significance of home, school, toys and play to a small child in order to capture the magnitude of these losses to

the women. Familiar surroundings provide the backdrop of safety and security from which children can explore the developmental task at hand. Likewise, young children make sense of their world and express their understanding of it through play. A child's toys are more than inanimate objects; they are an extension of the child's self and her connection to the external world.

Lynne's mother attempted to minimize her losses by keeping her in the same neighborhood and school. Even still, losing what she knew as her home was painful:

I would walk straight past my apartment [mom's house] to my dad's house where I considered home, cause all my toys were still there.

A significant loss for Melissa was the fact that she could not recall any home she lived in before age ten. She knows her family moved a great deal and she could recall one school she went to, but that was the extent of her memories of her physical world. Katie acknowledged a certain amount of stability in her life because her parents arranged for her mother to keep the kids in their same home where Katie lived her entire childhood.

All of the women identified significant relational losses as a result of the divorce. Three of the women's maternal connections were disrupted after the divorce.

A child's self has not solidified by preschool age. To develop a healthy sense of self, a young child will attach to a "self object" which is usually the primary caretaker or the

mother. The child borrows her self (so to speak) until the child's self is more stable. The importance of this relationship is invaluable in the child's development.

Three of the women spoke of the significance of the loss of their relationship with their mother. Angelina lost her mother emotionally due to her mother's anger, "A lot of my childhood was spent with my mom being angry at me." She also lost her mother physically because her mother had to work a great deal to support them. "When I was real little, my grandparents took care of me, but most of my life I was a latch key kid."

Lynne went from having a stay-at-home mother to a mother who worked outside the home:

I remember missing my mom, especially when she started working shift work at the factory and my sister, being the mother, and "bossing me." I remember having a lot of conflicts with her [sister]. I think I stayed home sick to try to spend time with my mom. Her shift rotated so some weeks we didn't see her.

Even with the strains of the divorce, Lynne has maintained a close relationship with her mother. Angelina and Melissa, on the other hand, recalled having distant relationships with their mothers. Melissa gave little to no description of her relationship with her mother. Angelina described the loneliness she felt from not being able to get through her mother's anger to achieve a real connection with her.

Karen, Katie, and Sue all reported a stronger relationship with their mothers after the separation. Karen's mother pursued a Ph.D, which took them across the country from her father. She and her mother spent a lot of time together:

I've always felt very, very good about my mom and my relationship. We've always had a strong one. We had to rely on one another. We're very similar even now. We still talk all the time. I've always respected her and wanted to be like her.

Katie remained "intensely loyal" to her mother. However, her mother is emotionally distant and withholding. Katie idealized her mother and wanted to be with her until her mother "fell off her pedestal." Katie's relationship with her mother changed after she found out that her mother was involved with a married man. They have not been close since. Katie's mother has also remained angry at Katie's father which made it difficult for Katie at times. However, her mother was the parent that was there for her physically and Katie did what it took to stay on her mother's "good side."

By contrast, Sue did not experience any significant changes in her relationship with her mother. The separation, relocations, and her mother's new marriage, have all seemed natural to her.

While some of the women carried sadness with them about the changes in their relationships with their mothers after the

divorce, the relationships with their fathers have taken a different emotional twist.

Angelina felt that she and her father have gotten closer since the divorce:

I think I got closer to my dad cause he was the person I could talk to about my mom. We played the same roles. When he lived there, he got her anger and when he moved out I was the one who got her anger.

Angelina's relationship with her father was complex. He seemed to be the only adult that she was able to emotionally connect with; yet this connection seemed to violate parent/child boundaries. Angelina's father allowed her to connect to him as a victim of the mother's anger. It was a role which they shared. However, he did not see Angelina on a regular basis, chose relationships with women who appeared to dislike Angelina, and never provided her with her own bedroom in his home. Angelina's emotional survival has required her not to get angry with her father for abandoning her and not making space for her in his life. This disconnect may surface at some point in her life.

As a child, Lynne felt like "daddy's little girl." She believed her father would always be there for her to give her whatever she wanted. This illusion came crashing down when he refused to take custody of her:

I remember crying and saying I wanted to go live with daddy.

I was crying... and she {mom} said, "we'll pick up the phone

and call him I'll give you a bag to pack your stuff." Cause she knew what he would do, I didn't. I called him and was crying and said I wanted to come live with him. He started to stutter and said, "let me talk with your mamma." That's when I realized he wasn't coming and I had a little paper bag packed (laughs). I think when I first realized I couldn't go see him when I wanted, I was kinda hurt. That's probably a lot why I was crying. I think I thought he'd come get me when I wanted and when I realized it wasn't that way, it was kinda hurtful. . . and things are not how I thought they were even though I didn't understand.

This episode was a turning point in Lynne's relationship with her father. They grew apart. Today she has a great deal of anger towards him:

My dad and I don't have a relationship at all. We don't talk at all. My dad, as I've gotten older, I saw him for the person he really is. There were times when we needed things from him and he wasn't there. It was my mom or my grandmother who initiated us seeing him. He's just mean, he's evil.

While Melissa had a hard time recalling any specific events in her life prior to age ten, she had specific memories of her father and his home after the separation. She remembered visitations when her father sexually abused her. She gave vivid details of the house, her father's behaviors, and where her

brother was when the abuse took place. She told no one about the abuse until she became an adult. To this day she has no contact or relationship with her father. They have not spoken since 1990.

While Karen moved across the country away from her father after the separation, she felt like she did not lose her dad until he remarried. When Karen moved to Oregon, he would talk with her every week and send her cards. She traveled across the country to spend every Christmas and most summers with him. She always felt she was the center of his life. Karen became distraught when her father started dating her step-mom. It was during a summer vacation that her father ignored and yelled at her while he sat in the hotel room waiting for his girlfriend to call. Karen remarked, "That's when I started seeing him for who he was."

Karen's father took down all the photos of her in the house and replaced them with photos of his girlfriend. To date, there are no photos of Karen in his home. Karen described her feelings about that time, "Pissed me off. It really hurt my feelings. As a matter of fact, I didn't want to talk to my dad or see him. But, he didn't talk to me so how was I supposed to tell him that." Karen's relationship with her father remains tense, "It was more about what I did wrong and what he expected of me." Karen and her husband recently moved to the same town as her father to "get to know him."

Similarly, Katie was saddened by the changes in the relationship with her father after he remarried. She and her brother went from spending weekend visits with their father at his work place to staying with their new step-mom. Katie's step-mom hated girls. Even her own daughter did not live with her. She openly opposed Katie's presence. Katie referred to the entrance of her step-mom into the family as the beginning of the end.

He [her dad] wanted to force this relationship with me and my step-mom, that was never going to happen. And, she [step mom] would argue that she didn't want me around. And my dad, my dad spent so long trying to make everybody happy and no one ever was.

Katie came to a painful decision:

With my dad, I could never really count on him. I mean he came to everything I did, but he just kinda pissed me off. So it was really a mess and I hated going over there from about 8 to 13 years old. Then I chose not to go over there anymore.

It pained Katie to stop the visitations, not for herself, but for how it must have hurt her parents. Katie said with tears in her eyes, "But my dad never gave up on me, he always called." She was amazed at her own emotional out-pouring as she talked about this time in her life.

Katie now shares a good relationship with her father. His rage has mellowed and he has been able to accept some accountability for what happened.

Sue described the relationship with her father after the divorce as "comfortable." She transitioned easily between her mother and father, until her step-mom came into the picture. She felt the literal loss of her place in her father's life:

My dad had a huge house but my brother and I always slept on his floor [in his room] with him until my dad got remarried when I was in fifth grade. To this day my step-mom and I don't get along because of their first night of marriage. We went to sleep on my dad's floor like always and she was like no. My dad said you can do it one more time and then you can start sleeping in your own room. And they would sleep with their door locked and it was weird to me.

Sue's step-mom was verbally abusive towards her. Sue never felt she could tell her father what really happened. She spoke of the day she lost her father, "It was very crazy and messed up. After that I would avoid going to my dad's and I know it hurt him but I didn't want to be around her." Sue only recently, during a fight with her step-mom, told her father what she experienced and why she withdrew from him.

All the participants reported physical change and significant loss associated with parental separation. Perhaps the most significant loss was their sense of being protected as

children. Angelina felt unprotected from her mother's anger. Lynne had a sense of "losing her father's protection." Melissa was unprotected from sexual abuse by her father. Both Katie and Sue were subjected to emotional and verbal abuse from their step-moms. These losses are still felt by these women today with a great deal of emotional pain.

Three of the women made direct references to feeling "displaced". Angelina, Katie, and Sue felt that when their father's remarried, they lost their physical and emotional "place" in their father's home and life. Their displacement was symbolized by the removal of family photos, the moving to a new bedroom at the far end of the home, the father's focus on the new wife, and the loss of the father's involvement in the child's life.

Exposure to Abuse

Woven within the women's experiences were memories of physical, sexual, verbal, and emotional abuse. This abuse is associated with the loss of protection which came from structural changes within the family after the divorce.

For some of these women, the abuse came in the context of an already, unstable living environment where their primary caregiver, the mother, was often absent. Adding to the trauma, was the fact that the perpetrators were parents or stepparents, whom the children were suppose to trust. Betrayal and a sense of helplessness added to the victimization these women experienced.

As with many of the changes that came from Lynne's parents' divorce, the introduction of her step-dad into the family was significant and traumatic:

It just seems like black and white, the abuse started the day after they got married. He came and picked us up from school and started fussin at me. He had never been that way before. And he tried to spank me. I remember running out of the house and him running after me. I didn't go back until my mom came home.

Lynne continued to be the scapegoat in the family, suffering from the physical abuse and taking the blame for her step-dad's shortcomings. Her step-dad's violence towards Lynne ended his marriage to Lynne's mother:

My step dad wasn't working and wouldn't help my mom. My mom had worked a double [shift] and was lying on the sofa, I was doing my homework when he came in bitching at her. I piped in and said some smart ass thing to him and that started a big brawl between he and I. That's the first time, if he would have got a hold of me, he would have punched me. My mom called my brother to help because I was out of control and got my big brother to come over. The next day we went to school and got a call to come home. Without us knowing, my mom got an apartment and moved us out while my step dad was hunting. He wasn't allowed to contact us. She [mom] thought he was going to kill us, well me.

The end of this marriage was similar to the end of her parents' marriage. After a fight in the night, her mother packed up and moved out without explaining anything to the kids.

Melissa's story was different. The abuse she explained was sexual:

My brother and I would go there every other weekend. We had our own rooms but I remember having to sleep with him [father]. I don't know how old I was but I remember sleeping in his bed and I don't know if anything went on but I do remember feeling very uncomfortable with him. I can't tell you what age but he fondled me until I got the balls to say no I'm not going to sit there. And he would get all pouty and sad and try to guilt me into doing it but I wouldn't. But anyway he would do that and then when my brother was outside playing he would be taking a shower. I'd be sitting there watching TV and he would come into the room with a towel wrapped around him. He would do something to get my attention and then act like he dropped his towel by mistake but I think it was for real. So that went on for a long time. I didn't know what the heck was happening so when he would do it I just wouldn't look cause I figured he was going to do it so I just wouldn't look.

Melissa finally got old enough to be able to cut her father out of her life. To this day she has not spoken to him.

Angelina suffered a less violent, but emotionally painful form of abuse. She had to live with her mother's anger. Neglect, emotionally and physically, left her feeling alone both as a child and an adult. Tears flowed down Angelina's cheek as she described the difficulty of her situation:

And it wasn't like my mom was physically abusive. Just really, really verbally abusive and drank a lot, still does. She just gets really angry when she drinks. I talked to my dad about how bad things were at home. He listened. But, he was helpless to do anything (laugh). Mostly, I just wanted to have somebody there that I could talk to (tears).

Katie dealt with her mother's anger as well, "My mom never got away from the anger that she had towards my dad." Unlike Angelina's relationship with her mother, Katie's mother's anger has always been directed towards her father and not Katie.

Katie received emotionally abusive messages from her step-mom, who constantly told her that she was not wanted. As a young child, Katie interpreted this as evidence that there was something wrong with her. It was not until she was a teenager that she gained the power to remove herself from the abusive situation.

Sue's step-mom was also abusive:

When they got married she would scream and yell. Like she would tell me if they ever got a divorce it would be my fault. She would come in my room close the door and yell at

me when he [dad] wasn't there. She would make me do things like clean the toilets and her son never did anything. It was very biased. She would act in front of him [dad] like we were this happy family. But she never was so bad in front of him. She did it behind his back.

When Sue became a teenager she stopped going to her father's to avoid her step-mom's verbal abuse. Sue never told her father because she did not want to be blamed for their problems. Sue and her mother were not emotionally close so she had no where to turn.

All of these women lost the sense of being protected by the adults in their lives. They all experienced role reversal. They took on caregiver responsibilities with their parents and they were responsible for their own safety and protection. When a child is parentified, anxiety can emerge that lasts throughout their life time.

Views on Future Relationships

One of the most important long-term effects of parental divorce on women is how they carry the experience from early childhood into their adult lives. All of the women identified distinct beliefs about relationships that stem from the experience of their parents' divorce. They all drew a connection between the struggles in their present relationships and the beliefs they developed during their parents' divorce.

Lynne explained how she enters into both friendships and romantic relationships "cautiously." "People have ulterior motives or maybe are not what they seem. They can only put on a façade for so long and then you see their true colors." Part of Lynne's trust is in feeling dependent on someone, "Watching my parents go through what they did makes me want to look out for myself. Trying to be independent not dependent. I don't ever want to be where I'm dependent on someone else." Lynne's difficulty in trusting others is imbedded in her fears and insecurities, "I have insecurities that someone will leave me. That they will get tired and turn to someone else. I have trouble trusting that someone loves me, you know love. Even if they tell me I'll still doubt it. I know that comes from old stuff."

With trust being the foundation of relationships, it is understandable why Lynne has difficulty with commitment in relationships:

I have a hard time with commitment. They may not hold up their end of the deal and then I'm stuck there. I don't ever want to feel stuck or not have a way out. So yeah it's [parents divorce] affected my relationships, I don't ever want to not have a back door. I hold back as far as intimacy, trust and communication. What I share, I hold a lot of things in that I probably should share. I hold back things like real emotional. . . I've always had a hard time

sharing emotions like crying. It probably goes back to all that [parents divorce].

As with many aspects of Melissa's life, she has a hard time reflecting on her views of relationships. She can talk about her idea of commitment, yet it does not match the reality of her relationships:

I consider commitment to be very important. I did cheat on a previous partner and don't want to do that again. I feel commitment is being able to share thoughts and feelings openly without being criticized or discounted. It's hard for me to trust 100%. It's been hard for me to put words to my feelings. I've hated having to talk and express myself and then start crying and not being able to stop. So I don't get into stuff, cause I feel like if I start crying I'll never stop.

Of her parents' divorce, Melissa said, "I just don't want to look at it at all. I don't ever want to remember anything about it."

Angelina shared similar fears to Lynne in regard to issues of trust and commitment. She identified how her parents' divorce shaped her view and behaviors in relationships:

I always had a fear that whoever would leave me, so I started having sex at a young age to try and keep guys. So the divorce affected me in a lot of ways on why and how I got into relationships.

Angelina talked about how her views on marriage were shaped by her parents divorce:

I view marriage that most of the time it doesn't work. I never felt marriage was a forever thing. I was married and I knew that I had an out, if it got bad I would leave. I felt very trapped by marriage. I wanted to know if things didn't work out I could leave.

Angelina's experience of parental divorce influenced her views on trust:

I was taught not to depend on anyone. I am very independent when it comes to meeting my own needs. My parents' divorce has made me count on myself more. I have a need to be in control. I know I can change things and get out if I need to. I guess I have become more cautious.

Angelina's final thoughts on her parents' divorce reflect her insight into this ongoing process, "There are things I didn't realize were connected. I guess I want to say divorce is no big deal and doesn't affect anyone, but it really does. It changed me."

Karen was ambivalent about divorce, "I always wanted to test a relationship because I never wanted to go through a divorce even though I didn't really see a bad part of it with my parents." Her parents' example taught her that she does not have to stay in a bad situation. She saw the positive side of her parents' divorce, which was the wonderful job her mother and

step-dad did at integrating the two families. They also have a good marriage, so Karen saw the value in starting over.

Katie felt her parents' divorce definitely affected how she thinks of romantic relationships. She explained, "This idea of dating and commitment frightened me. It freaked me out, it made me so uncomfortable. Commitment meant to me suffocation... not to be trusted, not ever to count on." Katie elaborated, "I think it would keep me from doing what I wanted to do with my life. I don't want to lose myself. I had these big goals for myself and I didn't want to sacrifice that for anybody. I saw it as one or the other."

Katie had a series of panic attacks in the early stage of her marriage. These attacks and therapy brought the realization of how much her parents' divorce influenced who she was:

No matter how much I discount it, it and say it's no big deal, it still affected who I became. You can't help it when you grow up in the mess of divorce. It's not the actual divorce agreement but everything that comes after it. It's about how people function in relationships. I see relationships as disposable.

Sue felt her parents' divorce has affected her ability to trust and commit to her husband. She connected her issues with intimacy to her parents' divorce. She believed that the difficulties in her marriage are related to her inability to trust which stems from the divorce:

It's almost like I don't initially have trouble with trust but once it's broken like with him [husband] it's like uncomfortable and hard to open that part of myself up. I've never been able to be really emotional with my parents. . . like I've never been able to emotionally attach. When it comes to that really intimate inside stuff it's hard for me to really depend on someone. I really think it's because of that [divorce].

Sue said of her feelings on commitment:

Being taken out of what I knew as normal and not really knowing why. I never felt settled when I was little. I spent the majority of my life packing my bag to go to my dad's house. So I don't know if when things get shaky in my adult life I pack my bags and go.

Sue was discontent with her marriage and her job at this point. She had an overwhelming urge to pack her bags and run.

Since these interviews were conducted five of the women have separated or have permanently left their spouses.

Conclusion

The findings of an inductive investigation of the experiences of parental divorce of six women were presented in this chapter. The findings support the suggestion that women whose parents' divorce when they are preschool age internalize and carry aspects of this experience with them into their adult years.

The final chapter provides a discussion of the findings in this chapter and long term implications. The results from this study will be discussed along with current research, the need for future studies and implications for intervention and policy changes.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe women's experience of parental divorce. Specifically, this study was to gain access into the subjective meaning of six women's experience of their parents' divorce process. The method of constant-comparison analysis utilized in the interpretation of data was based on Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory methods.

In an analysis of the stories examined through the clinical criterion set forth in this study themes emerged in five clinical areas:

1. developmental stage of the child,
2. relational dynamics,
3. exposure to a traumatic event,
4. post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptomology, and
5. internal states and behavioral components.

The first area, developmental stage of the child, examined the ability of the women to master the developmental task for preschool age children according to the research by Erikson (1960). The second area, relational dynamics, examined women's accounts of relationship changes resulting from the divorce process that may have contributed to the degree of trauma. The

third area, exposure to psychic trauma, examined the women's exposure to abuse within the context of their story of parental divorce. The fourth area, PTSD symptomology, examined the women's internal coping mechanisms. The fifth area, internal states and behavior components, examined the women's thoughts and feelings of their parents' divorce and how they have organized their lives around these feelings.

Discussion of Findings and Existing Literature

Due to the lack of literature on the subjective experiences of parental divorce on female children this analysis focused on, Wallerstein's longitudinal study (2000), and the clinical literature on trauma.

As stated earlier, the study of trauma is a way to understand an individual's systematic psychic organization of a traumatic event. The process begins with exposure to an event that the child perceives to be life-threatening. The experience is so threatening to their psyche that it is split off from the core of the self and frozen in time. Later in development when the child is exposed to a parallel experience, the earlier traumatic event may re-surface. That is, the feelings and/or cognitive memories emerge with the same emotional intensity as the moment they were first experienced. A discussion of this process is the heart of this chapter.

Developmental Stage of the Child

This study specifically focused on the parental divorce process that began when women were between the ages of 3-6 years old. While little research has been conducted on this particular aspect of parental divorce, Krantz, (1988) suggested that the psychosocial adjustment of children experiencing parental divorce is impaired. Wallerstein and Corbin (1989) suggested the greatest long-term impact of parental divorce depended on the age and developmental stage of the child. Wallerstein (2005) also identified the developmental stage of the child as a critical factor in an impediment to the maturation process. Basically, the child's ego development between the ages of 2-6 years impacts how the child interprets the situation around her. She then carries that interpretation with her through life. Wallerstein (2005) claimed that for some children the parental divorce process may "impede their developmental progress into full adulthood (p. 410)."

As discussed earlier, Erikson's psychosocial theory was used to guide aspects of this study. A basic assumption of psychosocial theory is that the individual must successfully master each of the eight stages of ego development in order to successfully move to the next stage of development. If a stage is not mastered, then the next stages of development will be adversely affected. According to Erikson's (1960) psychosocial theory, the first stage during infancy involves basic trust vs.

mistrust. He believes that basic trust is the cornerstone for healthy personality. In this stage the child must learn that the external world of caregivers, specifically the maternal relationship, has continuity and sameness. In turn, the child learns she can master and trust in her own ability to be trustworthy and that of the external world. This instills in the child a sense of being "all right." Erikson stated that this basic trust must be "firm" and "consistent" through the first several stages of development for following stages to be mastered. He stated that the success of this stage is dependent on the quality of the maternal relationship (Erikson, 1980). The mother creates a sense of trust in the child by providing sensitive care of the baby's individual needs developing a sense of trustworthiness within the child's self structure. The child learns to trust in self and their world and that they have purpose and meaning to their actions. This is critical in the child's development of "being all right."

The second stage, around early childhood to three years of age, is focused on autonomy vs. shame and doubt. This stage is focused on giving the child a greater sense of personal control. Through encouragement from caregivers and exploration, the child will learn to master self-control without the loss of self-esteem. Erikson (1980) states, "For autonomy to be firmly developed, a continued stage of early trust is necessary (p.71)." A disruption in basic trust could inhibit the development of

autonomy and leave an individual feeling as if they had no one to depend on (Erikson, 1980).

The task of the third developmental stage, around age four, is initiative vs. guilt. The child becomes more fully aware of herself as an active participant in the external world. She must learn she can initiate and have success in her world or the result could be guilt in trying.

Erikson's fourth stage, from 5-11 years, focuses on industry vs. authority. This stage is concerned with the child's industry in the world, in school and with other children. Development in this stage can be hampered if previous stages are not firm or if a major disruption in the child's life inhibits the child's need for the maternal bond. An internal drive to go out into the world may be stronger than the need for the maternal bond which could lead to guilt an/or anatomical inferiority (Erikson, 1980). This study recognizes that the healthy maternal bond consists of a quality attachment as well as a healthy level of intimacy between the mother and the child.

The fifth stage, from twelve years into early adulthood, is identity vs. role confusion. The adolescent is concerned how they appear to others. Ego identity is mastered if the individual has a confidence in the sameness and continuity given by their past experiences and is consistent with how others see them at this place in their development.

Stage six of ego development, adulthood, is where true physical and psychological intimacy can be formed given the ego developed healthy in previous stages. The failure to achieve this state of ego functioning could result in isolation, loneliness, or fears of intimate relationships with others. The women in this study are all in this stage of ego development where the primary task is to establish intimate relationships.

The last two stages are stage seven, parenting years, concerned with generativity vs. stagnation. This stage focuses on guiding the next generation along with value in society. Stage eight, late adulthood, is focused on ego integrity vs. despair. This stage captures the essence of ego integrity. That all the preceding stages are integrated and the individual has meaning in the fruits of their life.

The stages of Erikson's psychosocial theory have been presented as a foundation for analysis in particular to the development of trust to follow in the remainder of the discussion.

Relational Dynamics

In the analysis of the women in this study it is important to look at the maternal bond prior to the marital disruption to that bond after the transition of divorce. Some of the women did not have a strong maternal bond at any point in their development. For some of the women, the maternal bond changed due to lifestyle manifestations caused by the divorce. The women who

had a consistent maternal bond did have a different experience of parental divorce which will be discussed further.

Several of the women reported at length about the sense of not being able to trust the external world. They believed that ultimately one could only trust one's self. Angelina, Lynne, and Melissa spoke distinctly about their mother's emotional availability. Angelina even described abuse. All three women spoke about not being able to trust significant others in their adult relationships. This is consistent with the researchers claim that parental divorce disrupts adult children's ability to establish and maintain loving adult relationships (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, 2005). They came to only depend on themselves. The parental divorce occurred in all three cases when the women were at the stage where trust was the developmental task. They felt abandoned by caregivers, and they forfeited the paradise of trusting in their surrounding world.

Katie and Sue spoke of remaining close and bonding with their mothers through the divorce process. Unfortunately, they both also spoke of not being able to go to their mothers with their emotions. To a lesser degree than Angelina, Lynne and Melissa, Katie and Sue reported difficulty in expressing emotions to either parent. These women associated their difficulty in sharing emotions with problems in their romantic relationships. This is consistent with the research by Alper (2005) who

suggested that the "foundational glue" of a child's emotional competence is the intimacy between parent and child.

Supporting Alper's (2005) thinking, Karen reported a close and supportive relationship with her mother throughout childhood. She talked to her mother about her feelings and she had no difficulty with emotional intimacy as an adult. Karen does, however, attribute problems in her marriage to her difficulties with her father.

The relational changes which transpired during the divorce process contributed to the trauma experienced by each of these women. Researchers have suggested that the greatest damage occurs with young victims whose attachment to the primary caregiver is severed (Ornstein, 1996). Erikson (1980) also attributed healthy development in the early stages to the secure consistent maternal bond. Some women in this study lost or did not have a secure attachment to any caregiver during the divorce process and may not have one again.

Lynne attributed dramatic changes in her relationships with both of her parents to their divorce. Her mother was a stay-at-home mother prior to the separation. After she divorced Lynne's father, she had to go to work. Lynne did not see her mother for long stretches at a time, thus her mother became physically unavailable to her. Lynne spoke of her older sister taking over the parenting role. They both resented this role change. There was a change in Lynne's relationship with her father as well.

Prior to the separation she was "daddy's little girl." Shortly after her parents' separation, she spent a lot of time with him. The moment Lynne realized her father was not really going to be there for her was traumatic. When she really needed him he did not come for her. From that moment on, Lynne's relationship with him deteriorated to the point that now she sees him as "evil." In summary, After her parents separated, Lynne's mother became unavailable to her; she lost her relationship with her sister as roles changed; and her relationship with her father changed.

Melissa never felt supported by or connected to her mother. The only connection with her father was damaged by his sexual abuse of her. Melissa told no one of the abuse until she became an adult. This indicates that she did not have anyone with whom she felt safe enough to talk with about the abuse. The only supportive relationship Melissa developed was with her step-dad, who entered her life when she was in her adolescence. Melissa's relationship with her mother was distant and she had no contact with her father.

Angelina said little about her relationship to her parents before their separation, but she described her relationship with them after the divorce in detail. She reported that she replaced her father as a recipient of her mother's anger after he moved out. Angelina described her relationship with her mother as verbally and emotionally abusive. Angelina's relationship with her father was structured around her struggle to survive her

mother's abusive behavior. Angelina's father bonded with her in the victim role, thus becoming her equal instead of maintaining the parent-child structure. Angelina's relationship with her parents to this day is structured around the changes that occurred from her parents' divorce, leaving her with a great deal of loneliness.

Angelina, Melissa, and Lynne experienced major changes in their relationships with their parents which they directly attribute to their parents' divorce. The loss of a primary caregiver at a young age destroyed their sense of safety and stability. Reestablishing trust and safety remains an on-going challenge for all three.

Karen, Katie, and Sue suffered disturbances in their relationships with their fathers, but at later developmental points in childhood. For different reasons, each reestablished the relationship in adulthood. Karen, Katie, and Sue all experienced a disconnection with their fathers when their step-moms entered into the picture. The nature of contact from their fathers changed. Karen claimed this change was mutual, while Katie and Sue made the choice to discontinue contact to protect themselves emotionally. While this disconnect was the most difficult aspect of their parents' divorce, it was not perceived as life-threatening. Karen, Katie, and Sue had stable homes with their mothers. All three have sought therapy to deal with these issues.

Erikson (1960) described a split that occurs in the individual's emotional self where a part of the self is fragmented and frozen in the trauma. Other pieces of the self continue along the typical developmental path. Any trauma that occurs in the child's life can fragment parts of the self; so the child does not develop a "whole" healthy self. Erikson described, "the fact that human conscience remains partially infantile throughout life is the core of human tragedy (p. 257)." For some of the women who have experienced trauma, fragmented parts of the self may not trust in the development of a unified adult self. These women may continue to be emotionally stuck in childhood beliefs and fears.

Women with no attachment to the mother or any caregiver seem to suffer the most. Women with an attachment to their mothers seem to have a higher level of ego development. Karen who described healthy intimacy with her mother has shown the least amount of emotional suffering.

Exposure to a Traumatic Event

A critical element of what makes the event so traumatic is the subjective interpretation by the victim of how threatening and helpless they felt. It is the meaning they attach to the event that makes it so devastating (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). Psychic trauma occurs when individuals are exposed to an event that is emotionally overwhelming and leaves the individual feeling helpless. Experiences of great magnitude, like being a

prisoner of war camp, incest, or a natural disaster, are often the catalyst for psychic trauma.

Many researchers claim parental divorce to be as devastating to the individual as various forms of abuse and refer to parental divorce as a trauma (Figley, 1985, Eth & Pynoos, 1985, Van Der Kolk & McFarlene, 1992). However, it is not until the individual's story of parental divorce is examined do we understand the meanings they attach to the event, which then lends to the understanding of why this experience is considered traumatic for the individual.

Embedded within the accounts of Angelina, Lynne, and Melissa are reports of physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse. All of these women associate the abuse within the context of their parents' divorce, which has lead them to perceive the divorce as a traumatic event in their lives. Lynne's account of her parents' divorce included the history of physical abuse by her step-dad. She linked that abuse directly to her parents' divorce. With the abuse, came feelings that no one was there to protect her, her brother, or her mother from this man's abuse. Lynne became the protector of her mother and brother risking her own welfare and safety.

The only memory Melissa recalled of her parents' divorce was the experience of sexual abuse by her father. She remembered this abuse in great detail but has no other memories from that time. What Melissa attached to her parents' divorce was her experience

of incest. She had no protector; and the incest stopped only when she became old enough to stop it herself.

The meaning Angelina attached to her parents' divorce was that she was left with an alcoholic, verbally and emotionally abusive mother. Her parents' divorce meant that her mother's anger which had been directed towards her father, was now directed towards her. Equally damaging was her father's acknowledgement of the abuse she suffered, and his unwillingness to protect her. Instead, he aligned with her as a victim and chose not to parent.

For different reasons, none of the women's parents were able to protect them from abuse, which may have shattered their concept of safety and stability in the world (Horwitz, 1978; Terr, 1981; Wallerstein, 2000). As evident in their stories, one of the meanings they attached to the experience of parental divorce was the abuse they suffered. Certainly abuse as a correlate of parental divorce would qualify in a clinical classification as psychic trauma.

Katie and Sue experienced emotional and verbal abuse from their step-moms yet did not structure this around the parental divorce. They both saw this as a consequence of the divorce, but not imbedded within it. This may indicate a more mature ego on their part. Both also had a non-abusive parent/home to who they could retreat, unlike Angelina, Lynne, and Melissa.

PTSD Symptomology

The study of trauma is a way to understand the individual's systematic psychic organization of a traumatic event. The elements of PTSD symptomology have been identified as denial, shame, anxiety, fear of loss of control, pessimism, depression, guilt, and recurrent intrusive memories of the event (Eth & Pynoos, 1985). Children of parental divorce have been identified as showing PTSD symptomology such as denial (Luepnitz, 1979), shame, anxiety, pessimism, depression, guilt, and recurrent memories of the event (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein et al., 1988). The most apparent illustration of denial was Melissa's lack of memory of the events concerning her parents' divorce. Melissa ended her interview with the statement, "I just don't want to look at it [parents divorce] at all. I don't ever want to remember anything about it." Ironically, in clinical cases, it is common for memories of sexual trauma to be split off from memory. The fact that Melissa split off the divorce may indicate it was much more traumatic for her than the sexual abuse.

Lynne and Angelina also show some indication of denial as a means of protection to their psyche. Lynne had cognitive memories and could verbalize her feelings about aspects of her parents' divorce, but there remained a disconnect between her ability to feel the emotions and her memories of the emotions. Sue discussed being emotionally withdrawn from others. She never could be

emotional with her parents, because she did not get to work through her emotions about the divorce. She believed that her unresolved feelings have affected her ability to be emotionally intimate with her husband.

Angelina was able to access her feelings about her parents' divorce, except for her fathers' role and abandonment in her life. She recognized that he was not there for her on a cognitive level, but could not access her emotions about this reality. Katie had panic attacks early in her marriage which she attributed to fears surfacing from her parents' divorce. This is consistent with previous studies of the effects of parental divorce on individuals. The effects surface in early adulthood for many women (Wallerstein, 2000). The women's use of denial as a coping skill may suggest that the trauma is still to emotionally threatening to access for healing.

Van Der Kolk and McFarlane, 1996 have illustrated how trauma is not integrated as part of a personal past, but split off to exist independently of previous schemata. Time does not fade or transform the memory. These memories are often associated with intense feelings of irretrievable loss, anger, betrayal, and helplessness. The memories and feelings may lie dormant until another traumatic event brings them to the conscious surface. This may account for the fear the women in this study may have in retrieving the feelings they had/have about their parents' divorce. Angelina, Karen, and Katie were outwardly emotional as

they told their stories. Lynne and Melissa said they did not want to open up emotionally because if they started crying they feared they may never stop. Sue seemed unable to access any emotion.

A critical element of PTSD symptomology is the subjective interpretation by the individual as to how threatening and helpless the feelings may be (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1996). All of the women reported having a great deal of confusion as to what was happening in their lives at the time of the parental separation. Only Sue remembers having an adult explain what was happening, why, and what would happen in her immediate life. The other women remembered feeling confused and uncertain as to what would happen in their lives. They had no understanding as to the changes occurring in their lives at the time of their parents' divorce. This caused a great deal of anxiety that still lingers to this day.

Angelina, Lynne, and Melissa lost the connection with their mothers due to divorce. Young children need their parents or a person they are bonded to for physical and emotional survival consistent with Erikson's (1960) psychosocial theory. The very existence of the psyche can be threatened without a bonded caregiver to help them through the trauma. In somewhat different ways, each of these women had to dissociate or split off parts of themselves for survival at a young age, they have not yet re-integrated these parts of themselves into their adult conscience self.

Internal States and Behavioral Components

The women in this study developed internal states, thoughts and feelings, derived from their parents' divorce that they still carry into their adult relationships. These internal states are concerned with trust, intimacy, and commitment. This is consistent with Wallerstein's (2005) findings that many children of divorce struggle with acute anxieties about love and commitment which they bring into their adult relationships.

The women identified struggles in their current relationships which stem from the parental divorce. Researchers have suggested that female children of divorce show difficulty in their adult years on variables, such as self-esteem and feelings about intimate relationships (Zaslow, 1988). McCabe (1997) explained that it is not until women begin to establish intimate relationships that fears and anxiety surrounding family-of-origin issues surface.

The behavioral components of the women's internal struggles became evident as the women structured their relationships around early childhood beliefs. Trust is perhaps the single most important aspect of these women's lives that was altered by their parents' divorce. As explained through Erikson (1960), the developmental stage the women were in at the time of the initial disruption, may have disrupted their ability to trust in the external world and as adults they find they cannot or have great difficulty trusting others physically and emotionally.

Lynne explained that she entered relationships "cautiously." She does not expect consistency between who people say they are and what turns out to be her reality of them. Similarly, Angelina claimed she had difficulty trusting someone in a romantic relationship. Both women had strong beliefs about being dependent on another. They felt they could not trust someone enough to let go of their independence. Melissa said she does not trust anyone 100%. Katie believed "relationships are suffocating, not to be trusted, and I must not count on someone to be there." Sue did not trust anyone with her emotions including her husband. Karen did not discuss any concerns with trust.

Many researchers claim that female children of divorce have difficulty with intimacy (Wallerstein, 1991), yet intimacy is never defined. The women in this study clearly define what aspects of intimacy are difficult for them. Intimacy in this study referred to the willingness and ability to be vulnerable to another person, particularly in regards to feelings. All of the women had fears and difficulties with being intimate with partners. Lynne explained, "I hold back as far as intimacy, trust and communication." She held back sharing her feelings, such as crying. Melissa had difficulty sharing her emotions as well. She had a hard time putting words to her feelings and did not want to cry for fear of not stopping. Angelina talked about never depending on someone emotionally. Katie claimed that no one was there for her emotionally, that her mother was emotionally

distant, and that this affects her ability for emotional intimacy as an adult. Sue described an inability to emotionally attach to her husband based on the fact that she could never "open up" or cry with her parents. All attribute these defensive strategies to their parents' divorce and the fact they could only rely on themselves to get through the emotions.

Because most of the women did not have an adult to help them process their feelings at the time of the divorce, the women now utilize broken coping strategies, such as emotional withdrawal. All found trust difficult in romantic relationships. All reported an inability to enjoy intimacy. In sum, the ability to have a trusting relationship in which one can share vulnerable parts of "self" has been altered, making strong emotional connections non-existent in most of the lives described.

Individuals that suffer from PTSD organize their lives around the trauma, although the actual event may not be as devastating as the memories of the event (Van Der Kolk & McFarlane, 1992). The behavioral component of this examination is how these women have organized their lives and relationships around the thoughts and feelings they have of their parents' divorce. All the women reported having fears and insecurities in intimate relationships, yet some have structured their lives around these fears and insecurities. Angelina talked about her fear that whoever she was with would leave her, so she used sex as a way to get them to stay. Researchers described a higher rate

of sexual activity in adolescent girls and young adult women whose parents were divorced (Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Wallerstein, 2000). Lynne said, "I have fears of someone leaving me."

Both Lynne and Angelina use almost the same language in describing their determination not to feel stuck in a relationship. They both talked about always needing to have a way out. They organized their relationships around the fear of abandonment, with an escape route to avoid getting emotionally close. Thus, their defense was to leave before the other person leaves them. Katie said her parents' divorce has caused her to see relationships as disposable. Sue said she was always packing her bags to go to her father's house. As an adult, when life gets uncomfortable she has experienced the desire to pack her bags and run.

Women's fears factor into how intimate they will allow themselves to be in romantic relationships; i.e. they structure their relationships to avoid intimacy. When women enter developmental stages in their relationships that required more intimacy, they react. Ironically, five of the women have left their intimate relationships since the interviews were first conducted.

Researchers suggested that when children of parental divorce become young adults and begin to establish their own intimate relationships, fears and insecurities concerning commitment may

surface (McCabe, 1997; McLoed, 1991; Murphy, 1991; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998; Zaslow, 1988). Five of the women in this study believe that their parents' divorce negatively affected how they view commitment. They have reported having issues with trust, intimacy, and in general, have negative views of relationships. Commitment has been a struggle in all of the women's lives. Angelina put their view simply when she stated "marriages don't work" and "marriage is not a forever thing."

Karen is the one woman who expressed a positive outcome from the divorce. While, she still has a great deal of sadness when she talked about her parents' divorce, she has been able to see that when marriages do not succeed there is hope in starting over. Karen is the only woman who described a close, consistent emotional bond with her mother. She also described a seamless blending of families between her mother and her step-dad. This joining of families came when she was young so she called her step-dad "dad" and her step-brothers lived with them as they became one family. Her biological father has been supportive of this. Karen did express pain about the disruption in her relationship with her father, though they are doing well now. Karen's consistent emotional connection with her mother certainly brings into light some interesting areas for future studies on how children can best fair parental divorce.

Conclusion

This study reveals the long-term effects of parental divorce falling on a continuum from psychic trauma to giving hope in future relationships. While all the women expressed negative emotions concerning their parents' divorce the long-term effects vary. The single most important factor in the differences may be that children with a consistent secure maternal attachment and with greater levels of emotional intimacy with parents may fair the best and show typical ego development.

This study has some interesting clinical considerations for therapists working with adult women concerning relationship issues. Just inviting women to talk about her parents' divorce process has the potential to bring forth a rich emotional history, informing how the psyche may be organized around the divorce process, and indicating where an individual may be stuck developmentally. A focus on women who experienced parental divorce between the ages of 3-6 years should be analyzed taking into account early childhood development as described. A client may not be able to move forward in her adult relationships until aspects surrounding the parental divorce are healed thus gaining competence in delayed developmental tasks.

Therapists working with children can facilitate the child's mastering of the developmental stage that is "stuck", which would allow the continuation of healthy ego development. Many of the women in this study had no adult to tell about the abuse.

Establishing a good therapeutic alliance between therapist and child may give the child a safe adult to talk with. Therapeutic involvement with children of divorce may help address issues of abuse that go undetected otherwise.

It is more common for adults to use therapists to uncouple. In this process, therapists can help inform parents of the best way to work with children of divorce. Divorce should move to a place of being child-centered where the ultimate focus is on the best interest of the children, and where children can maintain secure attachment and emotional intimacy with the primary caretaker in their life.

Additionally, Wallerstein (1986) explains, "children of divorce represent a diverse population at risk for subsequent psychological problems, whose interests are insufficiently understood or protected by the legal system or the mental health community" (p. 105). At this time, the Superior Courts which determine custody, are not focused on children's welfare but parental rights. The legal system is not set up to access what could be vital information concerning the welfare of the child. Child custody cases are heard under the same court format as criminal cases. Change needs to be made so that the focus is on the child's needs specifically. Judges, mediators, and child advocates need to be more thoroughly educated in the area of child development and child psychology in order to help them make informed decisions concerning custody.

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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide

The following questions will be used to guide the interviews for the study:

1. When and how did you become aware that there were problems in your parents' marriage?
2. When and how did you become aware of the fact your parents may not live together any longer?
3. When and how were you told about what care-taking and living arrangements would be worked out for you?
4. What were your greatest concerns initially? later?
5. What support systems were available for you to talk about your thoughts and feelings concerning your family?
6. What were the major changes that happened in your life due to your parents' divorce in the first year? later?
7. How did your relationship to your parents change due to the divorce in the first year? later? Was there anyone or any thing that supported positive relationships? made them difficult?
8. How has your parents divorce effected how you as an adult establish romantic relationships and friendships?
9. Has parental divorce affected your thinking on commitment?
10. How does parental divorce impact your view of your future?
11. Are you content with how your life is going at this point?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

I agree to participate in the research titled *An Exploratory study of Women's Experience of Parental Divorce*, which is being conducted by Chris Olson, Department of Child and Family Development, University of Georgia, (706) 543-4948 under the direction of Dr. Pat Bell-Scott (706)542-4931. I understand that this participation is entirely voluntary; I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that it can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The following points have been explained to me:

1. This research is being conducted to gain a more in depth understanding of individuals subjective experience parental divorce. Insights from this investigation may lend to helping professionals and parents are more aware of how parental divorce impacts women into adulthood.
2. Participants for this study will engage in an two one-on-one interview at a location determined by the participant. The interviews will be unstructured open-ended lasting in duration for approximately one hour or a time set to the participants' comfort. Participants will be invited to share only information they are comfortable discussing. Participants will be offered a workshop on healing from parental divorce free of charge. Interviews will be audio-taped. Tapes will be erased by May 2007.
3. The results of this participation will be confidential, and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law.
4. For some women this may be an emotionally sensitive topic. Referrals for counseling will be available to participants.
5. No risks are foreseen.
6. The investigator will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.
7. My signature below indicates that the researchers have answered all of my questions to my satisfaction and that I consent to volunteer for this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

| | | | |
|--------------|------|-------------|------|
| Investigator | Date | Participant | Date |
|--------------|------|-------------|------|

(706) 543-4948 chrisolson@netscape.com

PLEASE SIGN BOTH COPIES OF THIS FORM. KEEP ONE AND RETURN THE OTHER TO THE INVESTIGATOR.

RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA WHICH INVOLVES HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IS OVERSEEN BY THE INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD. QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A PARTICIPANT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED TO DR. HEIDI L. ROOF; INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD; OFFICE OF V.P. FOR RESEARCH; THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA; 606A GRADUATE STUDIES RESEARCH CENTER; ATHENS, GEORGIA 30602-7411; TELEPHONE (706)542-6511

APPENDIX C
DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographics

Instruction:

I appreciate you taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. This will help better understand the range of experiences for those participating in the study. Please do not write your name on this sheet.

1. What is your present age? _____years
2. What is your relationship status?
 _____Dating
 _____Married/Life Partner
3. How old is your significant other? _____years
4. Have you ever been divorced? ____yes ____no If yes how many times? _____
5. What is your highest grade or degree in school completed? _____
6. What is your job title or occupation? _____
 For how many years?_____
7. What is your significant others job title or occupation? _____
8. Approximately, what is your (and significant others) yearly income?
 _____0 - \$20,000
 _____ \$20,001 - \$40,000
 _____ \$40,001 - \$60,000
 _____ \$60,001 - +
9. Were you adopted? ____no ____yes
10. What is your biological/adoptive parents highest grade level or degree? Mother_____ Father_____
11. Have your grandparents gone through a divorce?
 Maternal Grandparents ____no ____yes
 Paternal Grandparents ____no ____yes
12. Do you have siblings? How many same biological parents____, half biological____, step_____? Have any of your siblings gone through a divorce? ____no ____yes

13. How old were you when your birth or adoptive parents divorced? _____years
14. Have your parents remarried?
Mother ____no ____yes Father ____no ____yes