The Experience of Being a Divorced or Separated Single Mother

A Phenomenological Study

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Globethics.net Theses

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study utilized the phenomenological psychological approach to describe and understand the experience of being a divorced or separated single mother. The participants in this study were five African American, five Caucasian, and five Latino divorced and separated single mothers. Their ages ranged from 27-52 years, and each had at least one biological dependent child. The findings show that being a mother was of utmost importance, and children were central in the lives of these women. Relocating or moving after divorce or separation was found to be necessary for closure and mental health while adjusting to the new lifestyle after divorce or separation. Family life after divorce or separation was characterized by quality time, less stress, and more freedom and control for the mothers. They had no regrets about leaving a marital relationship that did not work for them, but they had become aware of their need for preparation before marriage. Unlike the Caucasian and the Latino participants, the African American women were more accepted by their own community; but they also had more child responsibilities because the fathers of their children were the least involved in the lives of their children. In their responses towards the prevailing economic situation, the Caucasian participants were future oriented, the African American participants were oriented to the present, and the Latino participants were oriented to the past. This study showed the importance for mental health clients to be allowed to talk about their cultural and religious values in order to address existing conflicts such as being divorced, which is contrary to the cultural and religious values of marriage and the preservation of the family unit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1

INTRODUCTION

I was thinking I married because of love, and I thought it was the right person. And when I was marrying my idea was forever... so then all the illusions and dreams suddenly fell apart... I think it wasn't immediate, and I think certainly we didn't have the relationship that we used to have. And then you are looking for answers, and you dig and dig, then you come to the point when maybe you are not going to hear what you want to hear, or maybe you don't want to hear the truth. And that's when after trying, and actually when that happened I think I was ready to move on... I was feeling upset. I think I had mixed feelings because I felt upset, I was scared, I didn't know I would make it. I was even questioning my motherhood, if it was going to be enough just with me around. And then the values ... At the beginning it was scary but I thought to myself maybe I will mess up sometimes (laugh), and it will be okay. And then I had to learn to trust my own judgments. Maybe it will not be right all the time, but I have to try... At the beginning I was scared, right now I feel more comfortable. I read somewhere that it takes you the same time to be yourself, for example if I was married for all those years it will take me the same time to get me to the point where I was feeling right about myself. So it's about time and I think rushing

things is not going to help, and I just have to go with the flow, and try to make the best out of it... It has been a long and painful process and now we are feeling better than when we started this journey. We are working every day to adapt our lives to the circumstances. Now my kids are more open and happy, and for me that is a blessing.

Joyce is a Latina separated single mother. Her lived experience of being a separated single mother, narrated above, is made up of a combination of different experiences that extend from the time she got married to the separation event, and to life as a separated single mother. It is a complex experience that can only be understood by looking at the different structures that make up her lived experience as a separated single mother. Joyce is one of the 15 divorced and separated women whose lived experiences are examined in this study.

Literature shows that divorce rates in the United States were at their highest in the 1970s and early 1980s, and then decreased after that (Mechoulan, 2006). During that period, according to Gruber (2004), divorce rates rose to above 200% in 15 years; while according to Allen (2006), no-fault divorce laws increased the divorce rate by 10% for about 10 years. Mechoulan (2006) attributed the increase in divorce rates to the no-fault divorce regulation, or the unilateral divorce law, which allowed either partner to seek divorce without fault on the part of the other partner. He attributed the decrease in the divorce rate after the 1980s to better matching between partners and change in behavior as people started to marry when they were older.

Stevenson and Wolfers (2006) found that in states where the unilateral divorce law was introduced there was an 8-10% decline in female suicide because it was easier to leave unhappy marital relationships. Divorce threats and the occurrence of divorce led to approximately a 30% decline in domestic violence for both men and women, and the ease of obtaining divorce contributed towards approximately a 10% decline

in females murdered by their partners as they were able to leave abusive relationships.

Divorce and separation are still prevalent in the United States with the divorce rate being about 50% of all first marriages (Hetherington, 2003; Portnoy, 2008). According to the American Community Survey 2005-2007 three year estimates, there were approximately 121,950,292 single women aged 15 and over who were either divorced, separated, widowed, or never-married mothers compared to approximately 101,324,687 divorced, separated, widowed, and never-married mothers in 1990. Among these women 48.5% were married but separated from their spouses, 2.6% were legally separated, and 11.6% were divorced.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Divorced and separated single mothers are the heads of a substantial number of households in the United States. According to the American Community Survey 2005-2007 three year data, approximately 13,918,181 women were heads of households in the United States. Studies show that divorced and separated women experience more adversity in life compared to married, cohabiting, and never married women (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Richie, 2003; Turner, 2006). They are also more vulnerable to mental health problems compared to their married, cohabiting, and never married counterparts (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006; Cairney, Pevalin, Wade, Veldhuizen, & Arboleda-Florez, 2006).

Cultural differences have been found in the prevalence of mental health problems, with White divorced and separated single women being more vulnerable compared to divorced and separated women from ethnic minority groups (Chatav & Whisman, 2007; Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007). These differences have been attributed to more availability of social support among minority groups compared to the White majority.

Similarly, divorced and separated women have been found to be the least satisfied with life compared to the married, cohabiting, and never married mothers (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2004; Bailey & Snyder, 2007; Evans & Kelly, 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Studies have also shown that children from divorced and separated families are at a greater risk for psychological, behavioral, and social problems (Beivk & Olweus, 2006; Hetherington, 2003; Harper, & McLanahan, 2004; Pan & Farrell, 2006; Portnoy, 2008; Weitoft, Hjern, Huglund, & Rosen, 2003).

The above studies investigated particular aspects of the lives of divorced and separated women using quantitative methods. By quantitative methods alone, it is difficult to understand the life situations leading to lower levels of life satisfaction or mental health problems mentioned in the above studies. Most of the studies have explored the negative or positive aspects of the lives of the divorced and separated mothers. The current study is not based on negative or positive aspects of life; it embraces all aspects of the lives of these women. A qualitative examination of what divorced and separated women say and feel about their life experiences brought forth richer data and a better understanding of their lives as they experienced them, the difficulties they faced, and aspects in their lives that made life easier for them in their single mother status.

This study describes the experiences of divorced and separated women. The detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of divorced and separated women clarify the particular aspects in their lives that cause low levels of life satisfaction, and make them vulnerable to mental health problems. This study also highlights particular aspects in their lives that facilitate life satisfaction and mental health among divorced and separated women.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The goal of this study was to utilize the phenomenological framework in order to understand and describe the participants' lived experi-

ences of being divorced or separated single mothers, and the meaning they attached to these experiences. As stated by Polkinghorne (1989): "The purpose of phenomenological research is to produce clear, precise, and systematic descriptions of the meaning that constitutes the activity of consciousness" (p. 45). Thus, the point of view of these women about their lived experiences is helpful in understanding the experiences that lead to their vulnerability to mental health problems (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006; Cairney, Pevalin, Wade, Veldhuizen, & Arboleda-Florez, 2006), the reasons behind less satisfying lives among divorced and separated mothers (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2004; Bailey & Snyder, 2007; Evans & Kelly, 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006), and positive aspects in their lives that promote well-being (Molina, 2005; Sakraida, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). This study examined the similarities and differences across the three ethnic groups, African American, Caucasian and Latino, and among the participants themselves.

The phenomenological perspective was most suitable for this study because it sought to find out the basic meaning of the phenomenon under investigation which was the experience of being a divorced or a separated single mother. The meaning of the experiences of divorced and separated mothers was provided by the participants through descriptions of their experiences that were accessed through open-ended interviews.

Divorced and separated women's subjective view of their lives, the meanings they attached to their lived experiences, and how they felt about these experiences, was important in understanding their life situations. This study empowered the divorced and separated women who participated in it by giving them a chance to reflect on their lives, and to tell their lived experiences in their own words.

1.3 Research Question

The research question for this study was: What is the lived experience of being a divorced, or separated, single mother? Other questions that participants were asked during the interviews are found in Appendix A and B, and focus primarily on the experiences of these women during the divorce and its aftermath. But, due to the nature of open-ended interviews, the participants chose to speak about experiences before marriage that made them vulnerable to divorce. They also talked about the immediate causes of divorce or separation. Responses to these questions were reviewed and analyzed from a phenomenological theoretical perspective as explained in the Methods section. Necessary demographic information was collected from the participants using the Questionnaire in Appendix A.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is important because it provides a broad understanding of the experiences of divorced and separated single mothers. The qualitative design of the study yielded rich data about the lived experiences of these women that could not be obtained using quantitative methods alone. The importance of using the qualitative design is to give voice to the participants, and to put emphasis on the significance of their experiences as they describe them in their own words. The open-ended interviews also provided an opportunity for the participants to provide any information that was not included in the questions.

The findings of this study provide important information for mental health professionals who work with divorced and separated mothers because of its detailed information about the latter's experiences. Divorced and separated women (Cairney, Boyle, Lipman, & Racine, 2004) and their children (Portnoy, 2008) have been found to be more vulnerable to mental health problems and to utilize mental health services more.

Educators will benefit from this study because it provides a better under-standing of the background of students from female-headed divorced and separated families.

This study adds to the existing literature and research by examining what constitutes the experience of being a divorced or separated single mother among women who had been divorced or separated for at least one year and were custodial parents of at least one dependent child. This study makes an important contribution to literature because of its inclu-sion of equal numbers of participants from the three main ethnic groups in the United States, Caucasians, Latinos, and African Americans, which makes it possible to explore differences and similarities among partici-pants from these groups.

Also, the current study is the only one that solely focuses on the ex-periences of divorced and separated women in the western region of the United States, thus filling a gap in the reviewed literature. This study was done during difficult economic times in the United States (August, 2009 to January, 2010) and reflects the experiences of divorced and separated single mothers in the prevailing socioeconomic situation in the western region of the United States. Through the interviews, these wom-en expressed their experiences of the prevailing economic situation.

1.5 Operational Definition of Terms

The following are definitions of terms as they are used in this study.

Divorce

Divorce is the legal termination of a marital relationship.

Marital Separation

Separated mothers are those who are still legally married, but are separated from their spouses, and have not gone through the divorce

process. It also includes those who are not divorced but are legally separated permanently or temporarily from their marriage partners.

Separation

In this study the word is also used to refer to the severance of the relationship between formerly cohabiting couples. Those women, who have been in cohabiting relationships rather than legal marital relationships, are referred to as separated. The word separation is used to refer to those who have left legal marital relationships but are not divorced, as explained above in Marital Separation.

Cohabitation

This refers to the situation where a couple lives together without being officially married.

Single Mother

For the purpose of this study, a single mother is one who is divorced or separated, including those who have left cohabiting relationships, and not cohabiting or living with an intimate partner in the same household during the period of the study.

Participants

These are the individuals who volunteered to participate in this study by providing information about their lived experiences as divorced or separated single mothers, from their own perspectives and in their own words.

Open-ended Interviews

An open-ended interview is conducted by use of open-ended questions. During the interview, the participant takes the lead in talking about the information she views as relevant to the phenomenon being examined, from her own experience. A single open-ended question starts

the interview. Other questions may be used to get clarification or to follow up on particular issues and to keep the flow of the conversation.

Epoch or Bracketing

This is the process the researcher engages in reflecting and writing down her own personal meanings, assumptions, biases, and experiences concerning divorced and separated women. The researcher engages in this process with the intention of acknowledging these assumptions, biases, meanings, and experiences in an effort to set them aside in order to avoid their influence in understanding the phenomenon as described by the participants from their own point of view.

Imaginative Variation

This is a process in data analysis whereby the researcher, by use of imagination and intuition, seeks to find diverse meanings of the meaning units in the descriptions of the phenomenon provided by the participants.

Intentionality

Intentionality is the purposeful acknowledgement of the participants as existing in place and historical time, and understanding their descriptions of the experienced phenomena in relationship to their social situations.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of things or phenomena as they are perceived. It is a descriptive approach used to study human experience. A phenomenological study seeks to understand a phenomenon as described and viewed by the person who has experienced it. This is done through acquiring the descriptions of the experiences of the phenomenon from those who have experienced it, then analyzing the data to get the meanings attached to these experiences.

Phenomenological Reduction

This is the process of isolating meaning units as they appear in the descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Main Concepts

For the purpose of this study, this literature review focused on studies that identify the concerns of divorced and separated mothers. A few selected studies utilizing large population samples that included different categories of single mothers were included. The physical location where these studies were done showed the necessity for the current study which is derived from the experiences of divorced and separated women in the western United States of America. The review also reflected the themes studied in these different places, showing how divorced and separated single mothers might have similar or different experiences in different parts of the United States and the world. This review of literature on divorce and separation examined academic literature from 2003 to 2009 and cites Lowenstein's (2005) meta-analysis of literature from the 1980s to 2002.

In the reviewed literature there were only seven qualitative studies: five from the United States with divorced persons (one included men), one from Australia with adult children of divorce, and one from Canada on paid work, family life, and childcare among single mothers who were not necessarily divorced or separated. The dominant themes indicated in these qualitative studies were pre-marital experiences, pre-divorce is-

sues, the decision to divorce or separate, the divorce or separation transition, post divorce experiences, and parenting.

Lowenstein's (2005) meta-analysis of literature from 2003 to 2009 indicates the following causes of divorce and separation: women's independence; early and arranged marriages; economic factors; poor intellectual and educational social skills; liberal divorce laws; sexual factors leading to incompatibility; role conflicts; alcoholism and substance abuse or risk-taking behaviors; differences between the partners; religious factors; and attitudes towards divorce. The identified consequences of divorce were the diminishing of the father's role in the family, the negative impact of divorce and separation on children, the emotional problems experienced by those involved, and reduced standards of living.

2.1.1 Pre-marital Divorce Risks

The reviewed literature identified some pre-marital concerns that were risks for divorce and separation. Among these were early marriages, arranged marriages, personal differences, and the presumption that dating normally led to marriage despite having problems in the relationship (Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008). Hetherington's (2003) longitudinal study also showed that children of parents who divorced and had multiple relationships were also at a greater risk for divorce, and that most of the problems that led to divorce or separation were experienced in the marital relationship.

2.1.2 Pre-divorce Issues and the Decision to Divorce or Separate

In relation to women's psychological and physical well-being, studies show that unhappy marriages are worse than the divorced status, and that women also initiate most divorces because they are dissatisfied with

their marriages (Hetherington, 2003). Among the problems identified in the period preceding divorce were alcohol or substance abuse, violence, problems in sharing family responsibilities, husbands controlling their wives' incomes, husbands' dislike for their wives' promotions at work, infidelity, loss of trust, husbands' lack of emotional support and availability, poor communication, conflict avoidance, physical abuse, dishonesty, and inequality in the marriage partnership (Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005; Molina, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

Lowenstein's (2005) meta-analysis of studies from the 1980s to 2002 highlighted many causes of divorce and separation. These included women's independence because they got jobs and income which made it easier for them to initiate divorce and request custody of their children. Marriages before the age of 18 were most likely to end in divorce, women without sons were more likely to divorce, and parental divorce made it more likely for children to divorce. The liberal divorce laws that took effect from 1970-1985 made it easier for people to divorce. Poor mate selection, lack of preparation for marriages, women earning more than their husbands, alcoholism and substance abuse, differences in sexual needs between partners, conflict in gender beliefs and expectations, differences in age, education level, religion, ethnic background, and employment status were risk factors for divorce. Transition to parenthood became a crisis for some parents and led to divorce, and attitudes towards divorce made it easier or more difficult for individuals to make the decision to divorce.

In her study with African American women who had experienced divorce, Molina (2005) identified the problems in the period preceding divorce such as inequality in the marital relationship, alcohol and substance abuse, violence, emotional and financial abuse, husbands' control of their wives' income, and difficulties in sharing family responsibilities. She also found that during the divorce period women suffered emotion-

ally because their husbands stalked them, called them repeatedly at work, and became more violent.

The causes of divorce established by Schneller and Arditti (2004) were emotional distance, inequality between the partners, and poor communication. The women in Thomas and Ryan's (2008) study reported alcohol and substance abuse, infidelity, and loss of trust as the causes of divorce.

2.1.3 Post-divorce or Separation Experiences

According to Hetherington (2003), the two years following divorce are very stressful for both children and parents, and they are characterized by ambivalence about the divorce, continued conflict, attachment, loneliness, challenging family responsibilities, less financial support, and new relationships. He recommended that interventions such as counseling be employed during the two years after divorce when they are most effective. He stated that without the mentioned stressors people can adapt to divorce and separation within the first two to three years, and most people have adapted to divorce or separation after six years.

Studies have established that there are differences in adjusting to divorce and separation between those who make the decision and initiate the split-up, and the non-initiators. According to Sakraida (2005), Thomas and Ryan (2008), and Zimmerman, Brown, and Portes (2004), those who initiated divorce transitioned without many problems and adopted a more positive life soon after divorce, while those who did not anticipate divorce, and those who wished to preserve their marriages, went through longer periods of negative emotional experiences. Lowenstein (2005) found that those who initiated divorce were more likely to remarry than non-initiators.

There are positive outcomes of divorce and separation, especially for women who leave conflicting marital relationships. Women have been found to file most of the divorces when they are able to take care of

themselves and their children financially, and some women prepare themselves for divorce by returning to school and getting employment (Andreß & Bröckel, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005). Molina (2005) found that after divorce, the women in her study improved in their work performance and in raising their children.

The participants in the study by Schneller and Arditti's (2004) and Thomas and Ryan's (2008) studies reported growth experiences such as returning to school, buying homes, making financial and other decisions, improved parenting, increased self esteem, optimism, improved work experiences, self-independence, competence, sense of control and mastery, social adjustment, awareness of important aspects in relationships, and a general feeling of well-being. According to Hetherington (2003), the participants became independent and were also able to acquire new relationships; but Schneller and Arditti (2004) found that older women were less optimistic about permanent future relationships

Some divorced women have well adjusted and fulfilling lives as established by Segal-Engelchin and Wozner (2005). In their study they highlighted the advantages of having personal resources like education and employment, and the benefits of being independent and in control of one's life after divorce. The study also showed that after controlling for economic and paternal involvement, single mothers by choice and divorced mothers had a better quality of life compared to married mothers.

2.1.4 Losses Associated with Divorce and Separation

Bailey and Snyder (2007) found that divorced and separated people were less hopeful and less satisfied with their lives compared to the married, cohabiting and never married participants. They attributed this to the loss of a partner, which also led to decreased finances and increased responsibilities for the remaining partner. Women suffer more financial loss after divorce compared to men, but studies show that some women attach more value to other changes that occur in their lives, so

fewer finances do not affect their life satisfaction as much as they do men's (Andreß & Bröckel, 2007; Clark, Diener, Georgellis, & Lucas, 2006).

Other losses associated with divorce are companionship, social support, economic support, shared family and child rearing responsibilities, the family unit and non-parenting support. The loss and stress associated with divorce may have negative psychological effects such as depression on those involved. Some divorced persons also lose the confidence to get involved in new intimate relationships (Hetherington, 2003; Molina 2005; Sakraida, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

2.1.5 Mental Health Concerns among Divorced and Separated Women

Studies show that the stress and strain that single mothers endure in their lives is a predictor for mental health problems (Avison, Ali, & Walters, 2007; Turner, 2006), and that divorced mothers experience more adversity and financial strain than never married mothers (Turner, 2006). Crosier, Butterworth, and Rogers (2007) found that mental health disabilities such as depression were more prevalent among single mothers compared to married mothers, and attributed this to financial hardship and perceived lack of social support.

Molina (2005), Stewart (2005), and Thomas and Ryan (2005) found that as women went through divorce and separation, they experienced a lot of emotional discomfort which often led to fear, mental distress, and depression. Parenting stress, especially for single mothers with only adolescent children was also found to be a risk factor for depression (Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007). Kotchick, Dorsey, and Heller (2005) found that exposure to neighborhood stressors such as substandard housing, the presence of gangs, drug use and dealing, and physical violence

was related to greater psychological distress among African American single mothers.

Afifi, Cox, and Enns (2006) found that stressor values such as low education, low income, family size, age, and ethnicity had a negative impact on the psychological health of single mothers. They attributed the differences in psychological disorders between married, never married, and divorced or separated mothers to the experience of the divorce or separation event which is life changing, and to other factors such as conflict in marriage. Another explanation was the possibility that divorced and separated mothers already had mental disabilities before marriage which affected their marriages and led to divorce or separation.

An analysis of the 1990 National Comorbidity Survey of mothers with children aged 18 or younger (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006) showed that after controlling for variables such as sociodemographic factors and number of children, divorced and separated mothers, compared to married and never married mothers, had a higher prevalence of anxious misery disorder, depression, and generalized anxiety disorder among other mental health issues. According to Zimmerman, Brown, and Portes (2004), mothers with custody of their children had more psychological symptoms compared to the normative population. They also supported the findings of previous studies that the adjustment of custodial mothers was related to the well-being of their children.

Chatav and Whisman (2007) analyzed the National Comorbidity Survey of 1990 to 1992 for 5,877 men and women to examine 12-month prevalence of mood, anxiety, and substance abuse disorders. After controlling for demographic information such as ethnicity, gender, length of marriage, and distal factors like parental death, parental marital dissolution, and parental mental health, they found that people who were divorced or separated were at a higher risk for mood, anxiety, and substance use disorders compared to those who were continuously married.

They also found that persons whose parents did not have a substance use disorder were more likely to use substances after divorce or separation.

Similar findings came from the analysis of the National Comorbidity Survey of 1992-1993 by Cairney, Pevalin, Wade, Veldhuizen, and Arboleda-Florez (2006). They examined 12-month prevalence of depressive disorders and alcohol abuse among 1346 women aged 15 to 55. They found that previously married mothers had elevated rates of depressive disorders and alcohol abuse compared to married and never married mothers.

2.1.6 Post-divorce Parenting

The negative effects of divorce have been found to harm both the parents and the children who depend on their parents for their well-being. According to Zimmerman, Brown, and Portes (2004), there was a strong relationship between the adjustment of custodial mothers and the well-being of their children, yet custodial mothers often reported psychological problems which could affect their parenting ability. According to Lara-Cinisomo and Griffin (2007), mothers with adolescents only had a higher risk for major depression than mothers with at least one younger child. Portnoy's (2008) review of literature showed that poor parenting after divorce could have negative effects on the children such as poor school performance, low levels of psychological well-being, early sexual activity, and use of alcohol and drugs.

Kotchick, Dorsey, and Heller (2005) also found that greater psychological distress among divorced African American women in poor urban neighborhoods was related to poor mother-child relationships and inconsistent disciplinary practices. Other risk factors that affected child outcomes were parental conflict, diminished or incompetent parenting in both the custodial and non-custodial parent, economic difficulties, loss of non-parental support, re-marriage or re-partnering, and living in poor neighborhoods (Hetherington, 2003; Portnoy, 2008).

For some families divorce provided an opportunity to leave the conflicting family situation for a better lifestyle. Most of the African American working class women interviewed by Molina (2004) reported improved parenting abilities and improved child school performance after divorce. These women also reported less tension, more family time, and closeness in the family. Only three of the thirty women reported difficulties in disciplining their children without the help of their ex-spouses.

2.1.7 Effects of Divorce or Separation on Children

Hetherington (2003), Pan and Farrell (2006), and Portnoy (2008) shared that the effects of divorce on children were detrimental to their mental health, behavioral conduct, academic performance, psychological and social development, and their ability to form satisfying intimate relationships as adults. Hetherington (2003) found that children from divorced families were at a greater risk of divorcing themselves, and children whose parents had multiple relationships had difficulty in committing to relationships as adults and were more accepting of divorce. Chances for divorce were also enhanced by antisocial behavior and lack of social responsibility which were found in both divorced parents and young adults from divorced families. Other risks found among children from divorced families were initiating sex at an earlier age, having more sexual partners, pre-marital pregnancies for girls, leaving home earlier, ineffective problem-solving strategies, and socioeconomic difficulties (Hetherington, 2003).

An analysis of forty years of census data by Gruber (2004) showed that adult children whose parents divorced under the unilateral divorce law were less educated, had lower family incomes, married earlier, separated more often, and had a higher probability of committing suicide. According to Portnoy (2008) children of divorce had higher levels of depression and anxiety, and lower self esteem. They also used psychiatric services more than children from intact families. However, he also

noted some protective factors in children of divorced families such as the personal characteristics of intelligence, self regulation and maturity, supportive relationships, caring, problem-solving, and seeking help.

The quality of the relationship between children and non-custodial parents is important for their development and well-being. According to Fabricius and Luecken, (2007); Hetherington (2003); and Zimmerman, Brown, and Portes (2004), the availability and quality of time between non-custodial parents and their children contributed significantly to their well-being, while conflict between parents, before, during, and after divorce had negative effects on children's well-being and development. Atenhofen, Biringen, and Mergler (2008) also found that interpersonal hostility between parents with joint custody led to the alienation of the nonresident parent. Harper and McLanahan (2004) found that children in low socioeconomic families whose father was absent had a higher risk for being incarcerated.

The negative effects of divorce on children have been found in other countries too. In a Scandinavian study, Breivik and Olweus (2006) examined children aged five to fifteen and found that children of divorced mothers, especially those between the ages of eleven to fifteen, were more likely to use illegal drugs, get drunk, smoke often, engage in violent behaviors, and have poor academic performance compared to children living with both biological parents. They stated that these effects on children of divorce in the Scandinavian countries were similar to those in the United States. In Sweden, children from single parent households had increased risks for psychiatric disease, suicide attempt, and alcohol and drug problems (Weitoft, Hjern, Huglund, & Rosen, 2003).

2.1.8 Social Support

Social support is instrumental in helping divorced and separated women to adapt to their new status in life, but often these women find themselves with very little support because their support system disinte-

grates during the divorce transition period (Thomas & Ryan, 2008). The study showed that women lost support from long term friends, family, clergy and attorneys, and only got support from divorced and other sympathetic women. They lacked emotional, physical, social, and financial support; but their children were a source of support and inspiration (Hughes, 2007; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

The participants in Scheneller and Ardittis' (2004) study reported loss of physical support, friendship with their spouses and partnership in family responsibilities, social roles, social networks, and parenting partnerships. Loss of contact with family and friends led to depression and lower levels of well-being in divorced women (Stewart, 2005); and social support and financial hardship were found to predict mental health problems among single mothers (Crosier, Butterworth, & Rogers, 2007).

According to Harknett (2006), perceived support was associated with reduced emotional well-being and material hardship, and support from family and friends enabled single mothers to work and earn their living instead of depending on welfare. Mason (2003) found that emergency childcare, supportive mothers, sisters or friends, and family- friendly employment helped single mothers to keep their jobs.

An analysis of 21 studies on the role of network support and individual friendships in adult post-divorce adjustment found that social relationships were associated with positive adjustment and less maladjustment (Krumei, Colt, Martin, Fogo, & Mahoney, 2007). The analysis showed that network relationships were important in promoting positive global adjustment and well-being, while specific relationships helped to reduce or prevent maladjustment. Greef, Vansteenwegen, and DeMot (2006) also found that social support helped families to adapt to divorce.

Social and cultural norms influence how individuals react toward their own divorce or separation. Some of the participants in Schneller and Arditti (2004) expressed that after divorce they felt they had failed

to meet family, religious, and social expectations, and bore the stigma of being divorced because cultural values and social attitudes favored the preservation of marriage.

2.1.9 The Importance of Education

Formal education makes individuals both resourceful and able to have more access to resources that are available in the community. Among low income single mothers, Harknett (2006) found that those with less than a high school education, low self-efficacy, and depressive symptoms were less able to draw support from family and friends. Lara-Cinisomo and Griffin (2007) found that mothers with a college degree or higher had a lower risk for depression compared to mothers without a college degree. Similarly, Jackson, Bentler, and Franke (2006) found that mothers with higher education had less depressive symptoms and better employment opportunities. Parents' education was among the factors identified by Greef, Vansteenwegen, and DeMot (2006) as helpful in family adaptation to divorce.

2.1.10 Employment and Income

Apart from its financial and material benefits, employment improves the subjective well-being of divorced and separated women. Curtis and Phipps (2004) found the ability to earn an income enhanced single mothers' positive self-evaluation of their health. According to Jackson, Bentler, and Franke (2006) participation in employment among former recipients of social welfare was associated with improvement in single mothers' psychological well-being and parenting. The divorced women in Thomas and Ryan's (2008) study reported that employment had a positive effect on their self-esteem and confidence. Employment also gave these women an opportunity to re-establish their social support network.

According to Mason (2003), paid work provided feelings of independence, competence, self-worth, skill, social opportunities, and structured time. It also made it possible for children to be with other children and under professional childcare. Single mothers were interested and willing to get paid work, but they were likely to leave employment if the income was not adequate for their needs such as housing, transportation, and childcare. Inflexible working schedules and having a sick child also made mothers leave their jobs. Turner (2006) found that being employed had mental health benefits for rural single mothers. Employment increased their mastery, self-esteem and fulfillment; it gave identity and influenced perceived parental success for these single mothers.

Mothers' employment status and income were also related to children's well-being. According to Mason (2003), paid work for single mothers was associated with their children doing well at school. Kalil and Ziol-Guest (2005) found that instability in single mother's employment was associated with adolescents' increased risk for school dropout, declined self-esteem, and personal mastery. The study also found a mother's involvement in unfavorable jobs increased adolescents' risk for grade repetition. A mother's loss of job was associated with adolescents' decreased well-being and persistent unemployment raised the risk for adolescents' school dropout. Neblett (2007) also found that an increase in wages and work hours improved child outcome among low income single mothers, but longer periods at work interfered with parenting practices and led to more detrimental child outcomes.

2.1.11 Dependence on Welfare

Samuels-Dennis (2007) found that single mothers' dependence on welfare caused them more depressive symptoms compared to employed single mothers and the general population. Neblett (2007) found that children whose mothers had some experience with social welfare had lower levels of cognitive performance and socioemotional functioning

compared to children whose mothers never relied on welfare. Older children were found to be more negatively affected as a result of taking on household responsibilities, or because they experienced longer unsupervised periods. Children of mothers who stayed on welfare had lower reading and math scores compared to children whose mothers transitioned from welfare.

2.1.12 Personal Characteristics

Personal characteristics play an important role in coping and adapting to life after divorce or separation. Stewart's (2005) study about satisfaction with life, adjustment, and coping resources after divorce in a sample of 245 single mothers established that a personal sense of coherence and sense of control had a stronger positive relationship with life satisfaction than contextual variables such as economic resources. Women with a greater sense of control and sense of coherence were more satisfied with life than women with a lower sense of control and lower sense of coherence.

In a study with a sample of 70 divorced custodial mothers in Israel, a quarter of the women reported that they had not changed; meaning that divorce had not affected them, or they had gone through the changing experience before the divorce or separation. Among these were some women who reported undesirable changes, which indicated that divorce was detrimental to their lives. But most of the women in the study reported improved self-concept, being more in control of their lives, more responsible, independent, competent, and having more self-esteem (Baum, Rahav, & Sharon, 2005).

Some of the women in Thomas and Ryan's (2005) study reported that they perceived themselves as having low self esteem during their marriages and that during the divorce transition they felt as though they had lost their identities which were hinged on being wives and mothers.

They also blamed themselves for the divorce, and had a difficult time adjusting to divorce.

2.1.13 Racial Differences

Only two of the reviewed studies indicated racial differences in the topics discussed. The Los Angeles Families and Neighborhood Survey (Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007) showed that single mothers had higher rates of major depression compared to married mothers, and White mothers had a higher risk for major depression when compared to Hispanic, Asian, and mothers from the Pacific Islands.

Chatav and Whisman (2007) used the National Comorbidity Survey of 1990-1992 to study mood, anxiety, and substance disorders during the first year of divorce and separation. They found that divorced and separated people had a higher risk for mood, anxiety, and substance disorders. Compared to those married and those from minority groups, White women were more likely to report a mood disorder after marital dissolution. Among the minority groups, there were no differences between married, divorced, and separated women. The racial differences in these two studies were attributed to the fact that minority women, compared to White women, were more likely to seek informal support when they were stressed.

2.2 Chapter Summary

The reviewed literature presents two sides of the experiences of divorce and separation, a positive and a negative side. The reported positive experiences were personal growth, improved self-esteem and self-image, being more in control of one's own life, feeling more competent, independent and acquiring new identities, mastery, and hope for the future. Life after divorce was also more fulfilling, exciting, challenging, and more satisfying for those who had left abusive relationships.

On the negative side, the period after divorce or separation was characterized by fear, grief, and uncertainty about the future, self-blame, a sense of failure, and social stigma. Physical and financial strain and mental stress made the women more vulnerable to mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, and substance disorders. These concerns also led to lower levels of life satisfaction. The negative effects of divorce on children and the personal characteristics that were helpful in adapting and coping with divorce were examined. Dependence on social welfare and its effects on single mothers and their children were addressed.

The role of personal characteristics and resources such as education, social support, and employment were discussed. Differences were found between women who initiated and therefore prepared to divorce or separate and those who did not initiate the divorce or separation. There was also a difference in the risk for mental health problems between White and minority divorced and separated women.

3

METHOD

3.1 Research Design and Theoretical Framework

This study is qualitative in design, utilizing a psychological phenomenological framework (see Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). The aim of the psychological phenomenological approach is to get to the basic elements, the structure or the essence of the phenomenon being investigated, by focusing on the content of human consciousness. The participant articulates her reflections, understanding and meanings she attaches to the experienced phenomenon being studied. The descriptions of the phenomenon are acquired through open-ended interviews with those who have experienced it.

These descriptions are subjected to methodological procedures to explicate the essential meanings of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants. The researcher engages in the phenomenological procedures of epoch or bracketing, description, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, synthesis, and intentionality in order to acquire knowledge on the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). These procedures are discussed in detail in the Data Collection and Data Analysis sections.

This study employed phenomenological procedures to investigate the phenomenon of being a divorced or separated single mother as experienced by the 15 participants who had been divorced or separated for at

least one year and had at least one dependent biological child, fifteen years old or younger. Phenomenological psychology "acknowledges the reality of the realm of meaningful experience as the fundamental locus of knowledge" (Polkinghorne, 1989, p. 43), recognizing the participants' descriptions of their experiences as the most important source of knowledge.

3.2 Researcher's Background

There were several things that prepared the researcher for this study. Prior to this qualitative undertaking, I conducted a single case study with a middle-aged, divorced single mother. The case study helped me to assess the feasibility of doing a similar study in the same setting, using the same methodology. I'm a trained marriage and family therapist, and the counseling skills of creating rapport, listening actively, making an effort to understand the client's point of view, and asking questions were helpful in interviewing the participants in this study.

In my A-level literature studies in Kenya, I had an experience that was similar to what I did in this study. I recorded oral narratives, transcribed them, translated them into English, identified the moral teaching that each narrative communicated, and I wrote a report on these stories. Being a woman also made it easier for me to gain access and the trust of the participants since it was a woman-to-woman conversation.

3.3 Research Participants

Phenomenological studies employ purposeful or criterion sampling because it is necessary for the participants to have experienced the phenomenon under investigation (deMarris, 2004). Polkinghorne (1989) states the need for participants to be able to articulate their inner feelings and emotions and to express freely and willingly the experiences that accompany these emotions without shame or inhibition. Participants are

also required to be spontaneous and interested in their experiences of the phenomenon under investigation.

The number of participants required for a phenomenological study may differ according to the method of data collection. Polkinghorne (1989) gave examples of studies with participants ranging from 325 participants for written descriptions to three participants for interviews. Seidman (2006) recommended that the sample size should be determined by its representation of the population's different groups and by the saturation or completeness of the collected data.

The participants for this study were five African American, five Caucasian, and five Latino divorced and separated single mothers. Equal numbers were decided upon in an attempt to get equal representation of the three main cultural groups in the United States. According to the American Community Survey, 2005-2007 three year estimates, African Americans made up 13.1% of the United States population, the Hispanics made up 14.7%, and Whites made up 75.9%. Fifteen divorced and separated single mothers were selected from among 17 women who met the specific criteria for the study and volunteered to participate. Two potential participants, those who volunteered last, were left out in order to keep equal numbers of participants from different ethnic backgrounds so as to maintain equal representation, and for comparative purposes.

The participants had been divorced for at least one year, and they were not living with an intimate partner at the time of this study. They also had at least one dependent biological child, 15 years old or younger, living with them at the time of the study. Parents having only children who are 16 or older were excluded because children of this age can drive in the United States, and are more independent from their parents. The participants for this study volunteered freely to participate because they wanted to do so. They were not paid for their participation, and they willingly shared their experiences.

The ages of these women ranged from 27 to 52 years, with a mean age of 41 years. Fourteen of the participants lived in their own houses or apartments, and one participant had moved back with her own parents. Nine of these women initiated divorce or separation, three had a mutual agreement with their ex-spouses to divorce or separate, and three were on the receiving end of divorce or separation. Two women, one African American and one Caucasian were formerly in cohabiting relationships in which they were not officially married. One of the Caucasian participants was legally separated but not divorced, and one of the Latino participants was informally separated.

Name	Debbie	Brittany	Margaret	Mona
Age	27	27	35	47
Ethnicity	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Formerly	Married	Cohabiting	Married	Married
YMC	6	4	10	5
Education	MA	Some College	MA	Some College
Employment	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime
Income	3,000	1,420	5,000	1,600
YDS	1	1.5	1.5	5
Initiator	Self	Self	Partner	Mutual
#Child	2	1	2	1
Custody	Shared	Shared	Sole	Sole
Support	Yes	No	No	Yes
Rel./Spirit.	Neither	Religious	Spiritual	Spiritual
PD/S	Yes	No	No	Yes

	Gertrude	Lydia	Joyce	Meme	Ruth	Rachel	Judy	Queen	Virginia
	48	47	47	47	45	38	30	29	48
	Latino	Latino	Latino	African A.	African A.	African A.	African A.	African A.	Caucasian
	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Married	Cohabiting	Married	Married
	15	15	11	17	5	7	10	7	11
	BA	BA	Some College	BA	Some College	BA	BA	BA	Some College
	Part time	No	None	Fulltime	Fulltime	None	Fulltime	Fulltime	Fulltime
	1,100	0	0	2,600	2,500	0	2,000	2,000	—
	2	7	5	1	15	5	2	1	10
	Self	Partner	Mutual	Self	Mutual	Self	Self	Self	Self
	2	2	3	4	8	1	2	3	1
	Shared	Sole	Shared	Sole	Sole	Sole	Sole	Shared	Shared
	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Spiritual
	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Nelly	48	Latino	Married	7	BA	No	0	1	Partner	1	Sole	No	Religious	No
Celeste	52	Latino	Married	3.5	MA	Fulltime	3,500	3.3	Self	1	Sole	No	Neither	No

Table 1: Demographic Information

Legend:

African A.	African American
Custody	Child custody
YMC	Years of marriage or cohabitation
Support	Child support
Income	Monthly income from employment only
Rel. /Spirit	Religious/spiritual
YDS	Years divorced/separated
PD/S	Parental divorce or separation
#Child	Number of children

All the African American participants, four Latino participants, and one Caucasian participant identified themselves as religious and they went to church. Two Caucasian participants identified themselves as spiritual. One Caucasian and one Latino participants stated that they were neither religious nor spiritual. The table below (Table 1) shows the participants' demographic information. Each participant in this study is referred to by a pseudonym for the sake of confidentiality.

3.4 Data Collection

Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify and recruit participants (see Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The Interview Guide Questions (Appendix B) were emailed to the participants two or three days before the interview so that they could reflect on them and about

their experiences as divorced or separated mothers. This was to help the participants be prepared so that the interview would flow easily, and the participants would be ready with all the information they wanted to share. Only two of the participants did not have the opportunity to see the questions in advance because I could not reach them by phone, and I did not have their e-mail addresses until the interview date. Most interviews took place in the participants' homes or in the study rooms at the university library, and four of the interviews took place at other places that were agreed upon.

Participants' descriptions of the experience of being a divorced or a separated single mother were accessed through open-ended qualitative interviews. The use of open-ended interviews allowed the participants to describe their experiences, their feelings, and the meanings they attached to these experiences in their own everyday language. These descriptions were then analyzed to get the essential experiences, meanings and feelings of being a divorced or separated single mother.

Prior to data collection, a psychological phenomenological researcher engages in a process of self reflection called epoch or bracketing (Moustakas, 1994). In bracketing, the researcher examines her or his personal experience, knowledge, meanings, biases, and assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation and writes these down. This reflection is done in an attempt by the researcher to acknowledge, and put these assumptions, biases, meanings, and experiences aside in order to have a fresh appreciation of the participants' descriptions of their experiences. The bracketed reflections are used in data analysis during the process of imaginative variation whereby the researcher tries to extract as many meanings as possible from the available data. The following is the researcher's bracketed information.

3.4.1 Researcher's Bracketed Knowledge

When I was growing up in a village in Matinyani, Kenya, a woman who was separated from her husband and returned to her parental home was called "mukoma nthi" in my local language, which literally means one who slept on the floor. So there were marriages that ended in separation or divorce at the time. Three of my sisters left their husbands and took care of their children on their own without any child support arrangements. I have not talked to my sisters about their experiences as such, but I have learned a little about their lives by visiting them from time to time.

My three sisters have elementary school education only, and two of them have some training in dress making which has been a little helpful financially. Because of lack of enough finances, my older sister has not been able to educate her children beyond elementary school. Like most people my sisters depend on the land and seasonal rains for their subsistence and for most of their needs.

When my sisters left their husbands and returned home, my parents were happy to have them back and they particularly enjoyed having their grandchildren with them. Some of my other siblings would have preferred that my sisters remained in their matrimonial homes, but others did not seem to mind. To me, my sisters had the right to return to the only place they could call home if their marriages didn't work because they had nowhere else to go.

I left my family when I was 16 to go to a national boarding high school, and only went home to my family for three months every year for four years. Soon after high school I went to the convent, and since then I have only had short visits with my family. Therefore, my experience or knowledge about divorced or separated women is limited to my short visits with my sisters, and from dealing with students from single-mother families as a high school teacher and principal. Most of the single mothers that I knew did not have a high school education, but there

were a few who had employment and were doing well. Since most of the divorced or separated mothers I had encountered did not have a high school education and did not have well paying jobs, I may have been biased in thinking that divorced and separated women were not well educated, and that they were poor. The knowledge I have of divorced and separated women from those I encountered in my country may be different from the experiences of divorced and separated mothers here in the United States.

My knowledge and experience of divorced and separated mothers in this country was mainly from a White American divorced single mother who volunteered for a single case study and shared her experience. In her story, the single mother stated that she had financial problems for a period of time, then she was able to go back to school for a masters degree in education, and to earn a living by teaching. She also expressed that she received support from her family, among whom she lived after divorce. In the society, she stated that she felt like an outcast, especially when she went to church, because she knew that divorce was not accepted. Her children were grown up at the time she shared her experience with me. She expressed that she was very happy and contented with her life at that time.

From the academic literature I have learned that divorced and separated women are the most dissatisfied with their lives, and they are most vulnerable to mental health problems. But I have learned too that there are some divorced and separated women who are happy with their lives and with the decision to be divorced or separated. Some factors that are important in determining the kind of life divorced and separated women live are education, employment and social support; those who initiate divorce or separation adjust easily to their new lifestyles compared to the respondent. Children of divorced and separated women have been found to perform poorly at school and to have social and behavioral problems. Some positive aspects such as caring, supportive relation-

ships, seeking help and problem-solving have been found among children from divorced and separated families (Portnoy, 2008).

Since I'm a single woman myself, and a foreign student, I think I easily identified with these women, which may have been helpful in listening to them empathetically. After every interview and during data analysis I tried to be aware of my relationship with the participants, and the need to be objective. I did this by reflecting and writing down personal notes.

3.4.2 Interview Procedures

The interviews were open-ended. I started with the main question which was: "I am interested in learning about your experience of being a single mother who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship. Will you please share with me about your experience, feelings and emotions that are involved, and what these mean for you?" I used the rest of the questions in Appendix B to follow up if the participant did not include the answers to these questions in addressing the first question. Except for two of the participants, the other thirteen received the questions (Appendix B) two or three days before the interview date and they had time to reflect on them. This helped the interviews to flow smoothly as the participants spoke freely about their experiences. When necessary I used probes like: "May I ask how old you were when you first got married? I also asked for clarifications such as "Are you saying that it is not that you have no value but that you are treated like a second class person?"

At the end of the interview we agreed about how I would send the transcripts to the participants for personal accuracy check, and the possibility of a follow up interview if necessary. There were no face to face second interviews because I did follow-up via e-mail, by US mail or the participant met with me and handed the corrected script to me.

The estimated time for the face to face interviews, including the demographic questionnaire, ranged from approximately 30 minutes to two hours with a single participant. I voice recorded and transcribed the interviews myself immediately as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2005). While transcribing, I noted non-verbal cues such as laughter and interruption by children during the interview.

After transcribing the interviews, I did follow up through e-mail, by sending the participants the transcribed interviews, and requesting them to check their accuracy and to add any further information that they wanted to be included in the study. In the same e-mail I also asked the participant any additional questions that I had, including clarifications or explanations for phrases I could not understand or was not sure about. Some of the participants added more information to their original interviews, and only one participant failed to reply to the e-mail and phone calls concerning the interview transcript. All the other participants took time to read their transcripts and indicated where they wanted changes to be made. Others made changes themselves and sent the final copy to me. These steps were taken in order to determine data saturation and the trustworthiness of the descriptions.

3.4.3 Limitations

The first limitation in the data collection process was the fact I am a foreign student and had to listen to the taped descriptions several times in order to document the participants' words correctly. Sometimes I got some words and phrases wrong, but the participants corrected them when they got the transcripts. Some information was also unfamiliar, for example, one participant likened her family when growing up to that of 'Beaver Cleaver,' and I went to look for Beaver Cleaver on the Internet in order to understand what she meant. This was quite interesting.

I was aware that the participants could have a problem with my accent, and I spoke slowly and clearly, repeating myself whenever it was

necessary. I answered all the questions the participants asked me. I did this in order to get accurate descriptions and interpretation of the data which is necessary for the trustworthiness and dependability of the study. I did my best to make sure that communication with the participants was clear.

Before I started the interviews I was afraid that the participants might find it difficult to tell their deep personal experiences to a stranger, but I also anticipated the possibility that the participants might find it easier to share their stories with someone who is willing to listen to them empathically, and that they might embrace the opportunity to make their stories heard. The second anticipation was true because I felt comfortable and most of the participants were also comfortable as they freely narrated their experiences. Their honesty and openness was very important for the trustworthiness of the study, and their cooperation was necessary for the success of this study.

Participation in this study was completely voluntary; there were no incentives of any kind. This was a suitable because of the need for the participants to be willing to participate, and to freely share about their experiences. But it was also possible that only those who are comfortable being divorced single mothers, those who wanted their stories to be heard, and those who are proud of their achievements could be the ones willing to volunteer. This may reflect the potential for social desirability in the sample, which means that they were not really representative of the population being studied.

This was a cross sectional study which makes the findings limited to the historical time period covered in the participants' descriptions of their experiences, and in other aspects such as the prevailing economic situation, the geographical setting, and the population investigated.

3.5 Data Analysis

Raw data were organized according to dates, participant's pseudo-nyms, and interview numbers. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006) qualitative data collection and analysis are performed simultane-ously. Analysis begins as the researcher listens to the descriptions, seeks clarification or explanations, asks follow-up questions, and takes notes during the interview. Analysis continues through the process of tran-scribing the tapes and checking the accuracy of the descriptions with the participants before the main analysis is done.

I was able to transcribe most interviews immediately, before con-ducting the next interview, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2005). This was helpful for me because I became more familiar with the content, and I was able to identify leads and questions for subsequent interviews. I was also able to see what I needed to do differently to facil-itate the interviews that followed. Familiarity with the descriptions made it easier for me to start identifying concepts, meaning units, and themes, and to easily locate them in particular transcripts, because I knew what each participant had said. This was helpful in identifying themes that were common or different among participants. Giorgi (1985) and Polkinghorne (1989) recommended the following process for phenome-nological data analysis which guided my data analysis.

3.5.1 Phenomenological Descriptions

Transcribing the tapes into written transcripts is the first step in the data analysis process. After confirming the accuracy of these descrip-tions with the participants, the researcher reads them several times in order to understand the content as a whole. The researcher is able to recognize and highlight with different colors, the concepts, words, phrases, ideas, beliefs and other patterns that are mentioned by the par-

ticipants. This makes it easier to identify meaning units that make up the different themes.

3.5.2 Phenomenological Reduction

At this stage the transcripts are read with the aim of identifying and isolating meaning units that are relevant to the experience of being a divorced or separated single mother. These meaning units are highlighted on the transcript and identified themes are written on the margins. Similar meaning units that are identified throughout the transcript are grouped together to form a single category. Appendix C and D show the themes and sub-themes that were derived from the descriptions of each participant during the first round of data analysis.

3.5.3 Imaginative Variation

In imaginative variation the categorized meaning units are subjected to imagination and intuition in order to find as many meanings or perspectives for each category as possible. These meaning units are then put into themes and coded. Basit (2003) suggested using themes identified in the literature at this stage; and themes are also drawn from the research questions and the bracketed information.

3.5.4 Synthesis

During synthesis the findings of the experiences of being a divorced or separated single mother are then integrated by bringing together common themes and stating the similarities among participants and participant groups. The differences between participants and participant groups according to cultural backgrounds, age, education, employment, socioeconomic status, choice or non-choice to divorce or separation, time since divorce or separation, and any other categories that may come

up from the descriptions are examined. A narrative statement of the findings on the essential structures of the experiences of being a divorced or separated single mother is written.

3.5.5 Intentionality

This final stage of phenomenological data analysis acknowledges that the participant exists in the world and cannot be understood apart from his or her world. Human behavior is seen as always directed towards another, or to something else, because humans are in constant interaction with each other and their world (Giorgi, 1985; Valle, King, & Haling, 1989). Intentionality situates the participants' described experiences and gives them a historical and social relevance.

This study takes into consideration the prevailing economic situation and social cultural perspectives on divorce and separation because they were relevant to the experiences of the participants as they described them. The themes identified in participants' descriptions make it possible to recognize potential implications to theory, professional practice and policies concerning divorced and separated single mothers.

3.6 Trustworthiness

According to Polkinghorne (1989) validity in phenomenological studies is about the trustworthiness of the study and how well the idea is grounded and supported by convincing and persuasive arguments. Trustworthiness is concerned with the process of data analysis and the accuracy of the findings in presenting the descriptions provided by the participants. I, the researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the study by following these procedures:

3.5.1 Trustworthiness of Descriptions

1. I audio taped the interviews and transcribed them myself in order to ensure accuracy.

2. I gave participants an opportunity to review their own transcripts for accuracy in representing their descriptions.

3. I cited participants' own descriptions or words to support the themes or statements concerning the experience of being a divorced or separated single mother.

3.5.1 Trustworthiness of Analysis

1. I reviewed the transcripts repeatedly during analysis and writing for continued accuracy.

2. I used inter-coder reliability by asking another coder, someone who is familiar with qualitative research, to code 3 of the transcribed descriptions. I calculated Cohen's kappa as recommended by Burla, Knierim, Barth, Liewald, Dietz, and Abel (2008), and Hrushka, Schwartz, St. John, Picone-Decaro, Jenkins, and Carey (2004). Cohen's kappa (k) was significant for the three transcripts: Virginia, k = .968; Lydia, k = .928; and Mona, k = .968, which showed trustworthiness in data analysis.

3. During imaginative variation, I explored possible meanings, themes and conclusions from the descriptions by use of imagination, the bracketed reflections, and information from the reviewed literature.

3.5.1 Trustworthiness of Interpretations

1. I reflected on and bracketed my understanding and knowledge of the experience of being a divorced or separated single mother before conducting any interviews.

2. I reflected on my feelings and thoughts concerning my experiences during the research process with the divorced and separated single mothers, in order to be aware of my own biases.

3.   I used several direct quotes of participants' words to support each interpretation, to validate the themes, and to support arguments for the findings of the study.

4. I triangulated data from the participants' descriptions, the reviewed literature and my reflections.

3.7 Dependability

According to Creswell (2007), reliability in qualitative studies is concerned with the richness of the data, detailed descriptions and the reliability of the coding procedures that are used. I transcribed the interviews word for word, and asked questions for clarification during the interviews, to make sure I got accurate information. I sent the transcribed descriptions to the participants for accuracy check. I gave the participants an opportunity to add more details to the study in order to achieve data saturation. The open-ended interviews yielded rich data that was used to support the themes that emerged from the descriptions.

Neuendorf (2002) recommends that at least 10% of data be coded by two independent coders for inter-coder rating, and Hrushka et al. (2004) and Burla et al. 2008) recommend use of 20% of the data for inter-coder reliability. I requested another person who is familiar with qualitative studies to code three transcripts for me. I gave her the coding dictionary, the table of themes and sub-themes (Appendix C), and then both of us coded one interview independently and compared the themes and sub-themes. Then I gave her three participant description transcripts, or 20% of the data to code. Cohen's Kappa was calculated for inter-coder reliability as recommended by Burla et al. (2008), and Hrushka et al. (2004), because it accounts for agreement expected by chance which percentage agreement does not account for.

According to Everett (1996) and Cichett (1994) Cohen's Kappa satisfactory level should be higher than .60. The following were Cohen's kappa (k) values for the three randomly selected participants' tran-

scripts: Virginia, k = .968; Lydia. k = .971; and Mona, k = .932. These kappa values show significant agreement between the coders, and confirm the dependability of the analysis of this study.

4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the lived experiences of divorced and separated single mothers by utilizing the psychological phenomenological approach. This study also examined the similarities and differences between Hispanic, Caucasian, and African American divorced and separated single mothers. Data analysis did not establish significant themes based on participant's age, education, years of marriage, years since divorce or separation, number of children, and ages of children. Age was not related to the fact that most of the Latino women were unemployed at the time, because the oldest among them had a well-paying fulltime job. Of those who had no jobs, Nelly had got employment before this study was concluded, and Joyce expressed that she did not have the legal papers necessary for getting employment. Lydia, who was on welfare, and Gertrude who had a part time job, had lost their own personal businesses as a result of the economic situation in the country.

On the other hand, it is possible that if all the Latino women were employed, their time orientation might have been different from their orientation to the past which was found in this study. Employment for all the participants could also affect the findings of this study concerning mental health issues because having a job enhances physical and psychological well-being of both mother and children. This study found

positive changes for the women and their families, but did not establish themes concerning positive changes in the lives of the children in particular. An exhaustive analysis of the participants' descriptions of their experiences yielded four main themes: Social cultural and familial perspectives; change; growth; and challenges.

4.1 Social Cultural and Familial Perspectives

The themes of social cultural and familial perspectives examined experiences that were common, and those that were different among the participants from the three cultural groups: African American; Caucasian; and Latino. The common social cultural experiences across the three ethnic groups were: Divorce is common as well as experiences of being judged, stereotyped, and stigmatized. Social cultural differences among the participants were: Acceptance of single mothers in their ethnic communities, the role of religion and spirituality in their lives, and experiences of the prevailing economic situation.

There was only one familial perspective that was common among participants from the three ethnic communities which was learned family values. The familial differences were: The presence of fathers in the lives of their children and the role of children in their parents' divorce or separation.

4.1.1 Shared Social Cultural Perspectives

Divorce is Common
Divorce was common, especially among African American and Caucasian families, because three participants from each of the two ethnic groups had experienced parental divorce. Latino participants had not experienced parental divorce, but data show that two of the Latino participants experienced divorce among siblings or other family members.

Meme, an African American, stated that divorce was common in her family.

> Well my grandmother was married and divorced I think it was three times; my mother was married and divorced I think three times. And I stayed so long in my first marriage... I got to a point where I got tired of that and finally ended it after 8 years. Then in the second marriage I had not taken care of my mental state and I ended up with the same kind of person in different wrappings...

Mona, a Caucasian participant, who had also experienced parental divorce, stated that divorce was a common phenomenon.

> I don't think anybody cares about divorce, or no one says so... I think because so many people are divorced it is just normal... I think because divorce is so wide, so common, people don't care...

Nelly, a Latina participant, who had been in the United States for eleven years expressed that divorce, was common in the Latino community.

> At first I felt like, when I left, I was glad that my father was not alive because I didn't want him to see that. But now it is not only here in the United States but also in Mexico. There's influence from this country in Mexico because I know now three of my brothers are divorced ... now with me we are four who are divorced. So for me there is not much difference between the Latinos and the Americans.

The participants' descriptions indicated that divorce was common among Caucasian, Latino, and African American communities. Divorce and separation were more evident among African Americans and Caucasian participants as most of them had experienced parental divorce, and also stated that marital dissolution was common. Among the Latinos, divorce and separation were not common in their parents'

generation, but marital dissolution was common in the participants' generation.

Experiences of Being Judged, Stereotyped, and Stigmatized
These experiences were common in the society, and among the people with whom the participants interacted. The participants expressed that they experienced being judged, being stereotyped, and stigmatized because they were divorced or separated. Lydia, a Latina divorced single mother, expressed her experience of being judged a bad person because she was a divorced mother.

> I remember I was dating this guy and this guy wanted to date me. We had a conversation and he told me, 'you must be a bad person because you are divorced, because you have two kids'. They already judge you bad without knowing how you are. They have this macho thing whatever. So I try to stay away from those types of guys relationships, it's like they are back there and you don't want that.

Debbie, a Caucasian divorced mother, expressed how difficult it was for her to deal with social stigma, and being blamed for breaking up her family. This conflicted with her belief that she had made the best decision for herself and her children, yet no one understood her. This was a difficult emotional situation to deal with.

> First thing, at the very beginning the hardest thing was the stigma from other people. I felt like as a woman it was my responsibility to keep the family together, I felt like I had tried everything but nobody understood that. So for me I knew it was the best decision for the children, but everybody else really questioned me on that, questioned how it could possibly be better to have them in a split family environment if I would rather keep them together. That was the hardest thing that still lingers on even though I still know that it was the best decision, and I am very happy with the choice,

but all those feelings of you know I broke my family up. I think that is the hardest thing emotionally to deal with.

Judy, an African American separated mother, expressed that people stereotyped single mothers without considering individual differences. She saw herself as different from the stereotypes such as single mothers who depended on social welfare and food stamps. She worked hard, and she was proud of her achievements as a single mother who was able to take care of her own needs and those of her children.

I think single parents are treated differently because they think that if you are single you have to be on welfare, you have to have help in the system, and I'm not on any of that. So like I said people always want, they already have it in mind what you should be, and I always exceed those expectations of what people think I should be doing and be. I am already working on my masters, I have two kids, and I'm a single parent.

Although the experiences of being judged, stereotyped, or socially stigmatized were common among participants from the three cultural groups, the participants disapproved of the stereotypes that people in the society imposed upon them. They felt that they were different from the stereotypes, and expressed that they wanted people to recognize them for who they really were: hard working, self-reliant, educated, and with the potential to overcome the effects of divorce or separation.

Some of the participants stated they had used social welfare and other community resources such as food banks, but they indicated that it was difficult to depend on community resources. They only used these because they did not have other choices at the time. Personal pride and reluctance to seek and use community resources were expressed by Ruth, an African American participant, who had used community resources during her time of need.

> I have been on Section Eight, I have been on food stamps, and I've used the community food banks throughout the city to help supplement until food stamps come...but I'm the type of person where I really don't let it be known unless I'm in dire, dire strait. And I think at the moment that I have not been in that situation, but maybe once.

Lydia, a Latina participant, was currently on welfare because she had lost her business as a result of the prevailing economic situation in the country. She expressed how hard it was for her to accept social welfare, yet she had no other choices. Her pride, and desire to be self-reliant as she had always been, was reflected in her words.

> At that time when I was divorced I had the money, I had the pride, I just didn't, but right now like this year, 2009, I do... I was even living two months without electricity... I filed for housing, they gave me housing but I didn't want to get it; I can make it by myself. But I cannot make it now. I'm applying for housing again. I learned that it is like insurance, I paid so many years of taxes, so it is like getting insurance from the government. I'm on welfare, it is not easy, and it is hard, it is not easy.

There were participants who never used community resources at any time because they had always been employed and able to take care of themselves and their children. Among these was Celeste, a Latina participant, who never used community resources.

> I never felt the necessity to do it, I always had enough... I have always been employed. I have always had enough money, maybe not much, but enough for my daughter, for me, for vacation, for clothes, everything. I think it is enough.

The participants from the three ethnic communities made it clear that even when they depended on community resources, it was not a choice for them, and being dependent was detrimental to their psychological well-being. They put a lot of effort into improving their lives, and some were working on their bachelor's or master's degrees in order to improve their economic well-being and lifestyles.

4.1.2 Differing Social Cultural Perspectives

Are Single Mothers Accepted?

Data showed that there were cultural differences concerning the acceptance of single mothers in their ethnic communities. African American participants expressed that single mothers were common and accepted in their community. Judy stated: "And I know, growing up, there are a lot of single mothers ... there are a lot of single mothers in the African American community, 90% of us are single parents. So I believe it is more acceptable."

Ruth, an African American participant, confirmed that divorced and separated mothers were accepted in the African American community. She tried to describe the differences between the African American, the Caucasian, and the Latino communities in the following words:

> I think different nationalities treat you differently. I think the African Americans accept single mothers as a normal type thing you know, even though it is not normal. But you know it is so regular amongst African Americans. And the Caucasians, it's kind of like you know... And so I hadn't really noticed anything different as far as the Hispanics or anything like that. I think that they are... I mean I have never had any comments or anything toward me, but I can tell the difference between the African Americans and the Caucasians. It's like they really see you as a single mother that she really, really needs help, she is a single mother, she is do-

ing this, you know, this is a hard thing; when African Americans are like: okay she is a single mom, okay, so what?

Ruth was only able to explain the difference between the Caucasian and the African American communities, because she had no experience concerning the Latino community. According to her, the Caucasian community saw single mothers as needing assistance, while African Americans saw them as normal. Divorced and separated mothers in the African American community felt more accepted, which helped them to be more settled as single mothers.

The Latino participants, except one, spoke about their families as being more traditional, where marriage was important. Joyce reflected on the importance of marriage for herself and her family, and how she felt different for being the only divorced person: "But I think it was just growing up in a traditional family and my parents were married for so many years, and my sisters are married, and my brothers are married, so I am the only one."

Lydia, a Latina participant, saw the Caucasian community as more accepting of single mothers when compared to her own community.

> It is hard because in the Anglo community there's not that many taboos, and they tell you how to do this, and you are certain of your life. Among the Latinos there are taboos and it takes time. And you got to tell people… I want to educate the community that being divorced is not like you are evil, or you are a prostitute, or you are an easy woman, no. It is a situation that happens and you move on and that's all. I want to teach the Latino community how to treat people, and not to judge. And that is why I try not to judge anybody, for anything.

Among the Caucasian participants, only two talked about their difficult experiences in their families after divorce. Margaret felt different in her family because she was the only divorced person. She said:

"And so I consider myself, I'm the one with the scarlet letter 'D' on my chest." Debbie stated how difficult it was for her, among family and friends, when she divorced. She explained how her mother, who had been divorced herself, could not acknowledge that her daughter was divorced.

> My family background in and of itself is a full separate culture. We have a history of uneducated single mothers of children, without fathers at all. So I think a lot of cultural stuff comes up in the decisions that I made... I think my family because I was the first one to like be in a stable marriage and getting educated; I'm just like breaking so many norms that have been in our family for generations. But I think the expectations were too high. I think they were excited not about the problems that I had in marriage, but about how wonderful it was… And I think they have a hard time understanding how I was educated. And as a single mother how I could do that and there has never been a single mother, who could actually live without government subsidies and I could do that. And I have a career...So their initial reaction was 'how could you do this?' They were really harsh on me. From their perspective they just saw that I was all of a sudden, very educated. I had a career and so I didn't want to be married and be with the kids anymore…But still, my mom is still somewhat ashamed to tell people that her daughter is divorced (laughter); so I kind of struggle with it...and my friends, I had a lot of friends I used to hang out with; as mothers we could go to groups. They are still married and have this whole thing like 'you are still so young. How could you do this?' So it's still very difficult I think.

The participants' words cited above showed that divorced and separated women were more accepted in the African American community when compared to the Latino and the Caucasian communities. Lack of acceptance made the experience of divorce or separation more difficult

for those who felt they were not accepted in their families because of their divorced or separated status.

Religion and Spirituality

There were cultural differences among the participants regarding the role of religion and spirituality in their lives. Four of the Latino participants, and all the African American participants, stated that they believed in God to whom they prayed, and they belonged to certain religious groups as well. These women said that their faith and prayer helped them during stressful times. Joyce, a Latina participant, stated: "And I have a lot of faith which I think helped me, and then I just let my feelings flow... I was praying, and I had long talks with God, and I think that is something that helped..." Queen, an African American, stated that the readings and sermon in the church were comforting: "Well, actually it's comforting to hear the passages, or relating to the sermon like, oh my God, I am going through that right now. So that's comforting."

Among the Caucasian participants only one went to church and prayed, the other two stated that they were spiritual, but not affiliated to any religious group. One said that she was neither religious nor spiritual. Brittany, who went to church, testified:

> I went to a small Baptist church and I got saved, and I went there for probably a good year... But I think being around people that were supportive, it was usually small. It was like another family, so they could, when things were turning sour again, they could help me see the real him. So that definitely helped...

Margaret believed in a higher power. She stated:

> I do believe that I am a spiritual person, but it is kind of an internal thing. But there is something that has been an interesting by-product of the divorce, which is that I think that I am almost much more resigned to the fact that there is a very strong higher power

directing us in certain ways. And before I think I felt much more that we make our choices and my version of God, or who I consider God to be, is sort of watching over with approval, you know, if you are a good person. But because there are so many things that have been put in place to help me to get through this, and to show me the strengths that I actually have, I think my spirituality is much deeper now... I don't think I believed that before, but I definitely do now. So my spirituality is much stronger now after, than it was before. But religion or church itself is not part of that for me.

Regarding religion and spirituality, Virginia said:

My spirituality, I consider myself spiritual in the sense that philosophically, and I hope that I communicate this to my son, and definitely my husband is the same way. We kind of live and let live, we kind of believe that there is an inherent good quality in everyone, and I am not a church goer.

Debbie stated she was neither religious nor spiritual.

Spirituality and church I don't really think, because I had many different religions coming and going as a child that I was exposed to. At the current moment I don't really think I'm religious or spiritual, so that is not a factor.

Participants' words stressed the importance of their faith, and their belief in God, or a higher power, as a source of strength. All those who went to church acknowledged the support they received. Lydia stated: "I remember in my mail box in the church when they found out that I had divorced; they put seventy five books about forgiving... they tried to support me." The participants who attended religious services received strength from their faith and prayer, and were supported by their church community.

Experiences of the Prevailing Economic Situation

This study was done when the United States was experiencing harsh economic times as many people lost their jobs, or had reduction in work hours, and they had to do with less than they had before. Most of the participants still had their jobs, but a few had lost their jobs. The participants' descriptions show differences in how they experienced this harsh economic situation.

Among the Latino participants, only one had a fulltime job, and another had a half-time job. The other three were unemployed at the time. The Latino participants related their financial situation to what they had previously, and they were grateful for what they had. Nelly, a Latina participant who was unemployed at the time said:

> The economic situation has a bad effect now, but it is because I know I had something before, and I know if I walked out (of the marriage) with something, without any debts and with at least my salary at that time, I would not be having the problems I have now. Because I'm always careful how I spend my money, because I look for deals and get goods for less money. I am very careful how I spend my money.

Lydia, a Latina participant, who had lost her business, and was unemployed at the time, said:

> It is the worst; it is the only problem I have. I have no money. I only have money to pay rent and bills and no extra, nothing. I have never been like that, it is a hard thing. But at the same time everybody is in the same boat so what happens is that people help you, you help them. So we just work differently but it's very, it's like because I used to have money before, people think I'm still the same way. When you really tell them I really don't have anything, I have nothing, it's like my money is allocated to all these things I need to do, and I don't even know how I am doing it, people don't

accept that. It is hard for them to understand, they still ask you for things that, before it was obvious like, 'let us go for a hamburger at McDonald,' 'no I don't have money'.... it is not because they don't care; people think I still have money. So it's like they can help anybody else but not me, and it is hard.

Celeste, the only Latina participant who had a full time job, stated her concerns as follows:

But anyway, I can tell you I am lucky because I just got my house then my salary was reduced. And I am in trouble because I cannot go to restaurants. I cannot do those kinds of things. But I have enough.

The African American participants, except for one, were grateful that they still had their jobs, and stated that the economic situation had not affected them, and that they were used to living with less. Queen said, "Well I have always been poor, so it is kind of the same old same old for me. I'm used to living with less." Ruth stated:

I would say that it hasn't affected me because God has provided food on the table, the lights are still on, the water is still running, I still have a job, and a roof over my head. So because I may not have the extra monies to go and buy something that I desire, that hasn't been the case anyway for a long time so (laughter).

Rachel, the only African American who had lost her job stated:

Well I lost my job; I am on unemployment and looking for a job. I lost my job, and my child had to change schools. So that was a big change and a tough one, maybe tougher for me than it was for her... so the economy has changed everything for us. Things are even more uncertain you know, we don't know in three months time, or in six months time how things are going to be like, how we are going to live. Are we still going to be able to rent an apartment

> or not? So yeah, there is a lot of uncertainty, and in losing my job I also lost my sense of security, and maybe a sense of purpose as well, because it was the one thing that I used to wake up to go to every day, do every day, and in a way it sort of defined who I was. I didn't realize this I thought this was a problem that only men had, when you end up defining yourself by what you do. But I learned that I was actually defining myself by what I did. So that has brought a lot of change in our lives.

All the Caucasian participants had full time jobs, and three had more than one job because they wanted to save. Their descriptions of their experiences of the prevailing economic situation reflected the psychological effects the economic situation had on many, including those who still had jobs. There was no guarantee for job security, and their financial future was uncertain. Margaret, a Caucasian participant, acknowledged this uncertainty when she stated:

> I think all of us are being affected. Where I am now, certainly being a state employee, watching the whole legislative proceedings, looking at the budget cuts and everything, I'm constantly concerned, very concerned... And so knowing that, I don't have a real back up plan, I also teach part time, so I have taken on more responsibilities. I do freelance writing part time, and so I have taken many more assignments. I have really focused just on really getting a good cushion of savings in case anything happens… But I have been much more focused on being much more conservative financially and really saving up money because there is this impending reality that I may be out of my position. Well, I'm grateful that it hasn't happened yet.

Brittany had three jobs, and she was planning to reduce her work hours in order to have more time with her son, but she was concerned because her parents were affected by the economic situation. She stated:

Economically though I really haven't, oh actually well my dad is a civil engineer... But they try not to talk about it in front of me so. But as far as me personally I haven't had any cut backs or anything.

Virginia was concerned because her ex-husband had reduced the money for child support after his salary had been cut, and she was going to lose work hours soon. She said: "... for me now I am about to get a salary cut, which means that I will have to go with less a month, which is a huge difference..."

One thing that these participants had in common was that they were grateful for what they had in terms of employment and income, or any other resources that were available to them. But their reactions differed in that most Latino participants looked at what they had previously. Except for the one who was unemployed, and was concerned about her future, the African Americans were content with what they had at the time, and the Caucasian participants were concerned about what they might lose in the future. They presented three different time orientations as far as economic experiences were concerned: the past, the present, and the future.

4.1.3 Shared Familial Perspectives

Learned Family Values

Regardless of the fact that divorce was common, participants from the three ethnic communities expressed family values concerning the importance of marriage, and keeping the family together, which were still important to them and their cultural groups. To be a divorced or a separated mother was inconsistent with these values which the women had internalized as they were growing up. Divorce or separation meant that they had failed in keeping these values. Lydia's words illustrated that divorce was not accepted among the Latino people.

> I was raised to be married for ever, and that's it ... Like my family being Latino, you know in my family we don't accept divorce and things like that. That was not my case because my mom was kind of, 'you know your husband is good.' And they didn't believe that he was gay and still don't believe that, and it is okay... Relatives do not say that you get divorced because they believe everything is fine.

Brittany, a Caucasian participant, expressed her experience of social expectations to get married, have children, and maintain the family unit. Her words also show that she realized that lack of preparation for marriage led to choosing an unsuitable partner, which increased her vulnerability to divorce or separation.

> It was hard at first because as you are told when growing up, first you get married and then have kids, and the dad is around and is helping you. And I think there was a lot of pressure when we were growing up to get married because I wanted my son to have a family and a dad more than, 'is this a good person and is he really going to do the job?'

Queen, an African American, expressed how difficult it was for her to leave an abusive marriage because her family was religious, and for them divorce was not acceptable. The family, however, accepted her back after divorce, and gave her the support she needed.

> My parents are very religious and they raised us in a religious household, and we always had this stigma about divorce. I always thought God would hate me, and so that's what really kept me there, the fear of God... So they are kind of like hey, come on over, don't worry. They're still supportive, we just don't talk about it, because I know where they stand, and they know where I stand obviously. So we just choose to respect each other's differences and move on.

These family values reflected not only the perspectives of the families from which the participants came, but also the views of their cultural groups. Being divorced or separated meant that the participants contradicted their family values. This meant that their families did not agree with their decision to divorce or separate, even though they provided material support.

4.1.4 Differing Familial Perspectives

The Presence of Fathers in the Lives of their Children

There were notable differences between the three ethnic groups regarding the presence of fathers in the lives of their children. The Caucasian participants, except one, reported that their ex-partners were involved in the lives of their children. They either visited the children, or the children went to live with their fathers sometimes. These mothers appreciated their ex-partners' presence in the lives of their children. Virginia was happy about co-parenting with her ex-husband and she stated:

> So we actually get along pretty well. We are both still very interested in our son's wellbeing and his future. And I haven't had to nag or complain to his dad to pay child support he has done so voluntarily, we pretty much split the expenses.

Only three Caucasian mothers received child support from their children's fathers, and they appreciated that too. Mona was happy with the financial child support that her ex-husband provided even though he rarely visited his son. She stated:

> And my ex-husband, if he had a million dollars a month to pay me for child support he would. I say I need 50 dollars to pay your half of medical bill, here is your copy of the bill, and he sends me a check for a hundred dollars. He doesn't have a whole lot of money

but if I needed it for our child he will pay, and I am supported that way monetarily with him.

Things were different among the African American participants. They all received child support from the fathers of their children, but these fathers were absent from the lives of their children. The African American participants stated that even when they were together with their former spouses, they were not playing their fatherly roles. Concerning her former cohabiting partner's involvement, Judy said:

> The bad part is that it just seemed like I had three kids instead of two. And financially he helped out somewhat, and then it was just difficult because he would just come and go sometimes; sometimes he wouldn't come at all. Sometimes I would miss work waiting around for him so. It has its ups and downs...

Rachel expressed her desire for the father of her daughter to be more involved in her life:

> I've tried and I'm trying to get them to communicate more together. There is some form of communication that they have but it's not that strong of a relationship, and my wish would be that they have a stronger relationship; that he would be more involved in what is happening in her life you know, regardless of what happened to us.

So the absence of fathers in the lives of their children was common among the African Americans. The participants from this community communicated a lack of commitment in their spousal relationships even before divorce or separation, and these mothers took most of the family responsibilities. Ruth's words concerning this were: "I couldn't see myself allowing him to take full range as father of the house, or man of the house, because he never did it, and I had to do it so....I've been tak-

ing on all the roles..." These women were also the sole custodians of their children.

Among the Latino participants, three stated that the fathers of their children had a good relationship with their children. Joyce said:

> ... one thing that helps a lot is that whatever makes me uncomfortable I tell him, and he always asks me before doing anything: 'What do you think about this?' Even when the kids are going to visit him he always asks me: 'How do you feel about this?' I think that has helped a lot…

Among the Latino participants, only one received child support from the father of her children. Gertrude expressed how her ex-husband reacted towards a court order for child support: "Last time when we went to court a month ago I think he was crying because they were going to get from him a hundred and forty dollars to support the two children..." The other two Latino participants had their children before they came to the United States, and before they got married. They did not talk about the fathers of their children, and they did not get any form of support from their ex-partners either.

Looking at the three cultural groups, Caucasian fathers were more involved in the lives of their children; African American fathers were the least involved with their children, but they all provided child support. In comparison, the Latino fathers' involvement in the lives of their children was in the middle with three mothers stating that their children had contact with their fathers.

The Role of Children in their Parents' Divorce or Separation

There were ethnic differences regarding the role of children in their parents' divorce or separation. Three Caucasian participants, and three Latino participants, stated that their children were one of the reasons for them to get divorced or separated. Brittany, a Caucasian participant,

used the following words to express that her baby was a reason for her to leave her partner:

> So, once I became pregnant with my son I kind of realized that I needed to get out of that, and then I ended up going back to him, as often happens. When I was six months pregnant I got an apartment… and when the year's lease was up on the apartment, I told them I was sick of him not having a job anymore, and I was sick of the abuse because the baby was here, and it was real.

Gertrude, a Latino participant stated that her husband changed when she got children, he became jealous of the children, and this changed their relationship and led to divorce.

> I told him the little baby needed 100% attention, and you are a mature guy and you can take care of yourself, but he didn't understand that. To me he was jealous of the kids. That's how the problems started.

None of the African Americans indicated that they left their partners because of their children. This made them different from the Caucasian, and the Latino participants. The difference may have come about because, as said above in the section on fathers' presence in the lives of their children, the African American fathers were not playing fatherly roles even during the marriage or cohabitation period. This was clearly stated by Meme: "He was not really much of a father figure and nurturer in the first place; they didn't really spend a lot of time together even when he was there." So the African American participants always took care of their families without expecting the fathers of their children to be more involved, and having children was not a reason to divorce or separate.

The common themes among African American, Caucasian, and Latino participants that were: Divorce and separation were common; divorced and separated mothers experienced being judged, stigmatized,

and stereotyped; and they valued marriage and maintenance of the family unit. The differences between the three ethnic groups were reflected in the themes: Acceptance of single mothers; the role of religion and spirituality in participants' lives; fathers' presence in the lives of their children; and the role of children in their parents' divorce or separation.

4.2 Experiences of Change

The theme of experiences of change considers the changes that occurred in the lives of the participants during marriage or cohabitation which led to divorce or separation, and in their lives after their spousal relationships ended. Five sub-themes emerged from the theme of change: Change in the marital or cohabiting relationship; physical change after divorce or separation; change in the lives of children; participants' change of focus; and participants' change of lifestyle.

4.2.1 Change in the Marital or Cohabiting Relationship

Fourteen of the participants reflected on the changes that occurred in their relationships during marriage or cohabitation, which caused dissatisfaction, and led to divorce or separation. Among these changes were that the ex-partners became violent, uncommitted to the relationship, emotionally unavailable, and unfaithful. The participants experienced problems in sharing family responsibilities, their ideals concerning marriage changed, there was lack of trust, they desired to be more independent, and they needed to ensure a better future for their children.

Five participants stated that they experienced emotional or physical abuse in their relationships, which was one of the reasons for them to divorce or separate. Queen stated her reasons for divorce:

> My ex-husband lied to me a lot; I didn't even realize how much, he just lied a lot. And there was infidelity in there, and there

were issues of mind games, and they kind of make you feel crazy. And there were things like that going on, and so basically, there was emotional abuse in the marriage.

Participants also experienced a lack of commitment on the part of their partners. Rachel stated that it was because she found herself in a relationship in which she was the only one who was committed that she decided to divorce.

I got to a point where I realized that I was in a marriage where I was the only one who realized that I was married. And I felt that the other person did not respect the commitment, they did not live up to the commitment, they did not care, or they were just not interested. But maybe they didn't have enough courage to say 'I want a divorce or I want out, I want to get out of the relationship.' So that is how I felt and that is how I got to make the decision to be divorced and it was very tough for me.

There was a general understanding among the participants that they married people whom they did not really know well, and after some time they realized their personal differences, and could no longer continue to live in their marital relationships. Some of the participants expressed how they realized that their former husbands did not want to have children, while they themselves wanted children. Virginia stated:

We really discovered we had different ideals of the relationship, than each of us thought we had coming into the relationship. And one of the biggest eye openers (laugh), caught me by surprise, was that he didn't want children... So I started feeling put down that I had to rush home every day and relieve the baby sitter and get dinner and get the bath... I felt that I was taking a lot more responsibility for our son. And I thought that he might be helping more...I can honestly look at the relationship and say, probably if we hadn't had a child we probably would still be together, because

having a child, really brought out different, like I said earlier, it brought out different dynamics in us...

The participants also expressed that they developed a desire to be independent, to be able to make their own decisions and to actualize them without being controlled by anyone. Debbie explained how this change took place in her, which ultimately led to her divorce.

...as I became older and more educated, and had more life experiences I changed. I think because in my family, I was always taught about a more traditional family. So I went into the marriage expecting that I was going to be a stay home mom, and be a housewife. At first I was happy with that. And then part of the problem became the more and more I had this desire to be independent, to have a job and work. And it came to a point I think where he wanted to have that traditional wife. And I think it came to a time when he would over-compensate and take the control back more than he wanted to, to begin with.

4.2.2 Significance of Moving or Relocating after Divorce or Separation

Eight participants talked about relocating or the necessity of physical change after divorce or separation. Most of the participants moved to their own apartments or houses, and moving or relocating took a new meaning for them in that they went to a new place, and started to live a fresh lifestyle. Relocating meant starting over. Physical change was symbolic of the psychological change that occurred as the participants left their past lives, and adjusted to their new lifestyles. Nelly expressed her desire to relocate when she said:

And I can probably change what is in my heart if I move to another city or state. I will feel much better because I am going to start doing like a brand new life and that is something I have been

thinking about quite a lot. I'm going to live here for this year, and by mid next year I'm going to start looking for another place to move to.

Margaret redecorated the interior of her house in order to realize this change, but she also expressed her desire to move far away in order to get closure, and start over.

And so I decided to sort of symbolically gut the house from the inside out.... And honestly, what I would love to do is move as far away from this man as possible. You know honestly that would give me that closure...because I have not had any emotional closure...so to have the physical closure, the lack of proximity, and the lack of seeing him all the time, it would make things much easier for me...to find new meaning in a new place, because I am still the same woman, with the same connections... It would be very nice for me to kind of find something new, a new space to kind of operate in and that's not possible because of the fact that my kids are here.

Among those who actually relocated after divorce was Celeste, and she stated the importance of this for her and her daughter as they moved away from the neighborhood where gangs and drugs were common, to a different state where her daughter went to a good school, and both went for counseling in order to facilitate behavioral change.

Then I flew back and settled here. Then we had a social change...Then she went to the best school, a private school, and no problems with peers. I chose the school because they focus on the emotional aspect of learning... She was in the best hands for education and for family... We went for counseling at the University and we got excellent help...

4.2.3 Change in the Lives of the Children

The participants noted negative change in the lives of their children, which resulted from divorce or separation. They reported negative emotional, behavioral, and academic changes in their children's lives. Some of the participants referred to their children as "being in the middle." Gertrude expressed how her children were between both parents, who were no longer together, and how this affected them.

> They are in the middle, and to me they are the most important persons because they are in the middle of this problem. They love him and they love me, and they see us fighting. I don't know what to say to you but in their hearts they got to be very afraid, I don't know. They got to be in the middle. I can tell you that is a bad feeling. One of my children, the older one, is a very bright kid. He was always having the highest grades in school and last year he came up with the lowest grades. He is very sensitive and he was very affected. The other guy he has started thinking a lot, but he never tells me anything. He was very afraid, I don't know.

Mona's ex-husband was in the military, and lived in a different state whenever he was in the country, so he rarely visited his son. Divorce had created a gap in the relationship between father and son. Mona expressed how this change affected her son.

> My son is very sick now. He is very sick and a very angry little kid because his father never visits, and with digestive problems, stress makes it worse... His dad was here when he was five... He was here when he was six ...Well he hasn't been here since he was six, so he hasn't seen him for four years. So how is their relationship? My son could care less. He wants him to be here, he wants to have a dad, and he wants to have his dad...

Queen noticed change in the lives of her children, although she stated that their father had not been really present to them during their marriage. The children were emotionally affected by the divorce.

> My oldest, she's like, I can see her kind of shutting down... And they ask for him, they say: 'Where is Pappy?' And I tell them: 'He has moved out, he doesn't live here.' And they say: 'Okay.' But there is sadness when they see him. But it's almost like they have already adjusted to it, because they were kind of used to it.

So the children's lives changed as a result of their parents' divorce or separation. The participants noticed these changes in their children, and they hurt for their children as expressed by Gertrude above and by Margaret when she said: "... as much as I hurt for me, which of course I did, I hurt for them." So mothers and children suffered emotionally as a result of the change in their children's lives which resulted from divorce or separation.

4.2.4 Change of Focus for the Participants

There was unanimous agreement among the participants that their children were most important in their lives. They used the word "everything" to explain what their children meant to them. Divorce and separation led to participants' change of focus from being wives and mothers, to being mothers only. Being a mother was central to all the participants. Joyce stated that after separation, together with her ex-husband, they focused the love they had for each other on their children. "... Our reason was to focus that love that we had one time on them. So we were just trying to help them, and we focused on them all the time until now." Ruth expressed that her children were everything because they gave her identity as a mother; they were the reason for her life.

> My children, they are everything to me. I would say I probably would be nothing without them because they are my life right

now... But they are my life and I would say that if I was separated from them I probably would be nothing, because I'm a mother, that is my tag you know.

Lydia expressed that she decided to have a child after divorce because she loved children, and she wanted to be able to apply her motherhood since her other daughter was grown.

When I got divorced at the time I only had one baby with this guy so. I like kids, so I decided to have another kid, my little baby is not from the divorce... So I decided to have babies, to have babies. So I decided to become a single mom, for my second child ... My babies are my whole life... but because I have my values, I have my young adult daughter, and my baby. That's why for me having a baby was important because then I can apply my motherhood and just be involved with her. Really having time to enjoy her, I think I have more quality time with her now than with my other daughter because I missed so much time with the other one while trying to make money.

4.2.5 Participants Change of Lifestyle

The participants experienced positive changes in their lifestyles after divorce or separation. Rachel expressed that she regained her good health after divorce, and that life was better for her.

Well it is good for me to say that I don't have to be on medication any more. And all those stress related problems I had they have gradually faded. I don't have those problems any more. I don't have to see an endocrinologist anymore or a rheumatologist anymore. So I think in a way I am somehow in a better place now.

Meme stated that being divorced had given her freedom to do whatever she wanted, and to work towards self actualization.

> Being divorced actually has given me a certain amount of freedom... So once I finalized the divorce there was a certain freedom to it... But being divorced for me had meant freedom to find out who I am and what really makes me who I am and what I like because for so many years I had given my life to him and my kids... So I felt kind of like I was in bondage and that I was locked up in my own home. And I really couldn't be free to do what I wanted to do. But now that I'm single, I can do whatever I want to do. I don't have to ask I can just do it. I don't have to be accountable to him. I don't have to have him hold me back, like I felt he was doing before. I can do what I want to do now.

Virginia stated that she had become independent because she didn't have to rely on anyone for financial support, except for the child support that her ex-husband provided.

> I have been here for about four years now. And I have been self reliant except for the exception that his dad does give money for his support you know, to help pay for groceries and all sorts of things.

Being single after divorce or separation gave the participants freedom, the opportunity to do what they wanted, and to become whom they chose to become because they had time to explore their potentialities. They were less stressed and more self-reliant, and their new lifestyles were healthier.

The theme of change showed that personal differences emerged in the relationships between couples. The changes that resulted from divorce, or separation, made it necessary for the participants to relocate. Parental divorce or separation changed some aspects of their children's lives. It led to a change of focus for the participants, and to a better lifestyle.

4.3 Experiences of Growth

Growth as a theme came from the reflections of the participants in retrospect, and on their current status. They reflected on their lives during courtship and marriage, and acknowledged particular aspects in their lives which led to divorce or separation. Looking back, they had no regrets that they divorced or separated. Growth was experienced as a process. The participants became stronger in character, and there was change in their way of thinking. They affirmed their personal characteristics, strengths and resources that helped them through life, and they were comfortable in their lives as single women.

4.3.1 In Retrospect

Pre-marital Divorce and Separation Risks

Because they had learned through experience, the participants recognized past mistakes, or lack of important aspects such as preparation for marriage during their courtship period. They realized that if they had been prepared for marriage, or had counseling before marriage, they would have known their partners better, and they would have known what marriage entailed. They got married when they were innocent, and ignorant, which increased their risk for divorce or separation. Lydia expressed this experience in the following words:

> We need to be prepared for marriage, prevention more than after. So I think we need to work more on prevention, on building relationships you know. For me I was blind when I got married to this guy I didn't know what kind of person he was, which means I didn't have good preparation to be married, I was blind. I wasn't prepared. I have some values but I was innocent you know... But I

can tell you I was very naïve; I was not ready because I was not prepared for this to happen. So I believe always in prevention but when this happens...

Looking back, Rachael remembered that she had noticed some peculiar aspects in their relationship before marriage, yet she still went ahead and married that person. She regretted that she did not terminate the relationship then. Her words represented the views of participants who stated that they wished they did not marry the persons they had married, and that they stayed in their relationships longer than they should have. This shows that the participants thought dating normally led to marriage, and that they were supposed to remain in the marriage regardless of the problems they experienced. Rachel stated:

> In the relationship it was kind of weird. I wish I hadn't gotten into it in the first place because I think for me I could see the type of person I was in a relationship with, but I kept making excuses for them... So I think, I wish before marriage I had looked at things objectively, looked at the relationship objectively and said, 'no we can't get into a marriage.' But I just kept making excuses so.

Participants, especially African Americans and Caucasians, realized that they married when they were too young. They admitted that although they realized this, they would not have accepted any advice not to get married at the time they did. Looking back, they realized that they should have waited to marry when they were older, as stated by Judy: "I wish that I would have waited before I had kids, until I was older."

Pre-divorce Experiences

An aspect of their marital lives that participants regretted, when they looked back, was that they got into marriage as submissive wives. They took care of most of the family responsibilities at home, without their husbands participating in tasks such as taking care of the children or

spending time with them. Participants became weary of being the ones doing all the work at home, because they also worked outside the home. This was one of the reasons for them to divorce or separate. Gertrude's experience was common among the participants.

> Well maybe I think I spoilt my ex-husband too much at the beginning, because I think I did not treat him like my husband, I treated him like my child. I think if I did not support him that much, he would be different, I think. I am not sure but that is my thinking.

These were the common lessons that the participants had learned, after reflecting on their experiences, concerning things that they wished they had done differently before and during their marital lives. Other experiences that some participants wished had been different were: not looking for help for their marriages before it was too late, the use of alcohol and drugs, and communicating immaturely with the divorcing partner, and the children, during the divorce period.

No Regrets

At this point in their lives, the participants looked back at the time they made the decision to divorce or separate, the time of the divorce or separation, and at their current lives and they were content. They felt that they had done all they could to save their marriages. This was expressed by Meme thus: "When I finally left for good, I had done everything I possibly could do to keep our marriage together; so there were really no regrets." The participants expressed that they had made the right decision for themselves, and their children as stated by Debbie:

> So for me I knew it was the best decision for the children... I still know that it was the best decision, and I am very happy with the choice...as far as the divorce I haven't had any regrets yet.

Some of the participants looked back, and were pleased with the process of divorce or separation because they had done their best at the time, and they were happy with how the process had ensued. Celeste stated her experience of the divorce process thus:

> So I got divorced. This divorce was totally planned and totally prepared. And the lawyer was helping me telling me what to do step by step, and then that was the divorce. There was no painful stuff for me because the painful stuff for me was before.

The decision to get divorced or separated as a result of the realization that they could no longer live a life that was not satisfying, and that they were able to take action in order to bring change into their lives, were expressions of growth.

4.3.2 Growth is a Process

The participants experienced the growth process continuing through the time of courtship, marriage and divorce, which they reflected upon in retrospect, to the time of this study, and in their anticipation for the future. Participants were at different stages in their growth processes, after divorce or separation, which was characterized by adjustment to divorce or separation, healing, and moving on with their lives. Queen was among those who were still adjusting to divorce. She said:

> Adjusting? I'm still in the process. I have not really adjusted, although I am definitely going on...For a while I hated him, I had a lot of anger against him, but then I was like you know what, it doesn't matter. I am done with that. He is gone and I'm done, so we are okay. We are civil. We don't yell anymore, it's actually better, because we are not attached, you know.

It took the participants many years to get over the divorce or separation event, and different aspects of growth were actualized at differ-

ent stages in their lives. Participants sought counseling for themselves and their children, in order to facilitate healing and growth. This was expressed by Meme as follows:

> Just recently my daughter went to counseling because she was experiencing some personal things and I didn't know how to handle it. So I allowed her go for counseling and during that time I sought out counseling for my own emotional needs because the fact that I am in another relationship now, I have a boyfriend, I find that a lot of things that I experienced, the traumatic things that I experienced scarred me from relationships that I had before, and I am finding that they are coming out in this relationship because I hadn't dealt with them. But I didn't even know that I needed to deal with it until I started counseling (laughter). So going to counseling helped my daughter to kind of let out what she needs to let out and talk about it without me being there. And I had to learn things.

Healing was a long process for the participants. Seven years after Lydia had divorced; she was engaged in activities that promoted healing and growth by reaching out to other people. She stated:

> Thank God I forgave. I think it took me, it was very hard to forgive him, I think it took me six months, with a lot of prayer, a lot of reading, a lot of trying to understand him. And now because I'm in this area I go to a gay bar to try to understand why people are like that. And I want to empower them and listen to them. And I want these people to be out of the closet because people need to understand them. So I'm around with gays now because it is part of my healing… So it is a process, healing is a process, you don't do it overnight, but of course change changes your life a lot, and you become a much better person, more stronger, more independent.

Growth also involved the ability to make new friends and create a new support network. Margaret was able to reconnect with old friends and make news one on Facebook. She said:

> I started my Facebook shortly after he left me. And I used it as an outlet for some emotions. Being aware that we had many mutual friends, I didn't talk about anything that would get me into trouble because I knew it would get back to him. But I did talk about my struggles and dating through status updates and posting things. And I can tell you I moved from having zero friends to over two hundred friends within months, and that was very validating. And I look at that as such an important element of my social circle now, it is crazy. I never thought that social media would have such a big influence on myself confidence, but it does. And I will say things online, lamenting about myself, and to have about fifteen people make comments of support, it really helped... There are people in Facebook whom I knew from high school and we haven't spoken since high school and they are now Facebook friends, so we do communicate frequently. And there are people professionally that I would never consider 'friends' and they are posting these comments of support.

4.3.3 Stronger and Thinking Differently

The participants realized growth because they experienced strength of character, and their thinking had changed. The period surrounding the divorce event had weakened them, but now they were finding themselves again. They felt stronger, and able to carry on with their lives as divorced and separated women. Gertrude expressed the realization that she could make it on her own:

> I think I feel stronger. Before the divorce I was thinking I am not going to make it by myself. Now I know I can make it, I can

do anything that I want. Before I was having doubts about my power to go ahead with life, but now I have made everything I want.

Margaret expressed that the experience of divorce had facilitated growth in her life; it had strengthened her.

> Again I feel much stronger now that I did this. And I think it takes much more strength of spirit to be a divorced person in that kind of situation where you were blindsided you know, where you never expected it, than it would to stay in a marriage for the wrong reason, or to hold on with your claws because that would ultimately be a horrible situation… I have overcome a lot. I have overcome things I never thought of, and this gives you strength of spirit that you never felt you had before. So I'm grateful for that.

The experience of divorce caused the participants to think differently about themselves, other divorced persons, their choice of partners, and their lives. Because her self-image had changed, Queen stated that she raised her standards for a potential future partner, a sign of growth projected into the future that was also expressed by other participants. She said: "And I have to say this, I don't think I will ever marry anyone again who does not have a bachelors or above… so now I have set up a ground rule…"

The participants realized that they had wrongly judged other divorced or separated people before, but now they understood them better, and no longer judged them. This change in thinking was expressed by Lydia in these words: "I was on the other side; now I can understand because I have the experience to be divorced and a single person. I will judge divorced people differently too because now I'm divorced and I know".

4.3.4 Personal Resources

Personal Characteristics

Personal growth was reflected in the participants' descriptions of their personal strengths, and characteristics such as having a positive attitude, working hard, being grateful, intelligent, and having the courage to face whatever came their way. These characteristics helped them to cope with the difficult experiences of divorce or separation. The participants saw themselves as people who looked at life experiences positively and tried to learn from these challenging experiences. This was expressed by Gertrude when she said:

> Everything that happens to me, good or bad, I try to look at the good side. A bad experience like divorce, I know the feeling, I feel the feeling, I know how hard it is, but I try not to get... I get depressed like any normal person but I get out of it by myself. I try to get the experience only, the bad experience I try to get it as a background. When something bad happens to me I try to see the nice part, just the part that makes me learn from the experience, and not try to stay there and to feel bad about myself. I say, well this bad thing happened but I try to learn from it and keep going. When I feel depressed I go to my house and listen to music, and if I don't feel better I get into the car and start going round not to stay in the house.

The participants dealt with problems as most adults do. They talked of their giftedness as individuals, and showed that they were capable of dealing with situations, as well as being able to achieve long and short term goals. Judy stated her strengths thus:

> My strength is I'm much focused on what I need to get done, and what needs to be done. And just focusing on my kids, and doing what needs to be done, go to work, be a good mother, and

working to support them. So taking care of them is what strengthens me because they need me.

Education, Employment and Income

The participants were proud of their educational and employment achievements that enabled them to earn a living and have a good lifestyle. Margaret considered herself fortunate because of her achievements:

> I think the education and the income and employment status all go together. I consider myself more fortunate than many women in my position because I have a secure, well paying stable position, and all of that was because I had spent some years as a younger person getting my bachelor's, then my master's degree and constantly working myself up in different positions. So there was no concern where I was going or how I was going to make ends meet or how I was going to take care of the kids. Financially I am very secure... Again I am very fortunate, I have a well paying position, in which I am not only able to make ends meet with my kids, but I also have money every month to put in the bank and not many people have that.

The participants expressed that they loved their jobs, and those who were unemployed at the time expressed their desire and determination to get paid work. But they also expressed that jobs that earned low wages could not provide for all their needs. This was expressed by Queen who stated that she loved her job, but called it a Catch-22 because she could not get help from anywhere, considering her earnings, yet it was not enough for her family needs. This is what she said:

> It is kind of a Catch-22 working here. I say that because I like this job, I like working here, but I make too much money to go and get any assistance from anywhere. Because you have to have noth-

ing in order to get any assistance... It makes me think that I need to find a different job. Even though I love this job, I want to change careers, because economically it's just a struggle. I don't know how I am able to pay my bills but I do somehow, thank God.

Meme also expressed the need for well paying jobs that would provide enough to meet the needs of single mothers, and their children. She said:

The other thing is that we need to make jobs that are going to pay us money, not just the minimum wage because we are taking care of a child besides ourselves and we need to make more than minimum wage.

The participants showed continued growth in their lives, despite the challenges they faced during divorce or separation and their aftermath. They had experiences that were unique to them as divorced or separated women, but they experienced growth and development like everybody else, and they worked hard to meet their daily needs.

Age

The participants had different views when considering their age as a personal resource. Their attitudes towards their ages also reflected on their personal growth. There were five participants: Celeste, 52; Lydia, 48; Virginia, 48; Judy, 30; and Brittany, 27; who felt that their ages were an advantage because it helped them to be good mothers to their children. Age had also provided work experience for Celeste, 52; and Virginia, 48. Others: Lydia, 48; Meme, 47; Rachel, 38; Margaret, 35; Judy, 30; Queen, 29; Debbie, 27; and Brittany, 27; considered their ages in relationship to being able to date and re-partner. There were those who felt young enough to start again: Queen, 29; Debbie, 27; and Brittany, 27; and those who felt that age did not matter: Gertrude, 48; and Rachel, 38. Nelly, 48, felt that her poor health was related to her age, and she

was concerned her age might interfere with her search for a job. She did not consider her age as an advantage, but before this study was completed she had already got a job.

Celeste stated that she was able to concentrate all her energy in raising her daughter because of her age. She also considered her work experience as a result of her age an advantage:

> I think my age is an advantage because my hormones are calmer, because when you are younger your hormones give you some directions or orders to follow. And when you are a single mom you have to give up about your hormones and keep doing your mother thing because you are the only person that is there for your child. Then my age is helping me because my hormones are not too pushy in me that I don't feel that big necessity, that biological need for a man, then I can give all my attention to my daughter. That is the advantage. Another advantage is that I have a lot experience in working in relationship with people in the social stuff. I have experience about how to handle social situations and relationships. My experience has taught me a lot because I have made enough mistakes in my life and my mistakes are leading me in the correct direction. That is because of my age. I can say when you are old you get calm and your experience helps to deal with situations, to analyze things; it is because of the age, not because of education.

Virginia expressed the same experience about her age:

> I think my age was definitely significant because I got married late, I had children late, I was in my 30's and so I definitely knew that I could stand on my own, I didn't feel helpless and unable to accomplish. I think if I had been younger I might have been scared that I couldn't raise children on my own, and I might have stayed in a relationship I was unhappy with. I have been in the work place

for so long, I have good credentials for working, and so I think that age was very significant.

Brittany, 27, considered her age in relation to being a good mother and to her desire to get a partner.

Well it's weird because many people think I am younger than I really am, they think I am like eighteen. So I get the feeling that people, when they see me in the class and when I talk about my son, they think that I got pregnant with him when I was in high school. I always wanted to be a young mom; I got pregnant with my son on purpose... I feel younger, but I also feel older too because I do have twenty seven years under my belt now. So I feel like I have enough experience to be a good mom to my son... Right now I'm too busy with school and work and stuff... but you always miss it... this person is committed to you and you always want that; but like right now I always tell people that I'm married to my son, my school and my work so. And sometimes I feel old and that maybe I should have somebody, but it is kind of the balance I guess.

For Meme, 47, age was not a problem in consideration to being able to date:

Because I have not had a problem in my life with getting men, I have always had men in my life; I have always been in a relationship with men since I was a teenager. At this stage in my life I want to see a man when I want to see him, and I don't see him when I don't want to see him.

Queen, 29, said she was still young and the future held a lot of potential for her: "I'm still young enough and I have a lot to do and a lot to live for, you know. I guess I don't feel like I'm not going to find anyone, I don't feel that way". Similarly, Debbie stated:

For me my age is one of the big things going for me right now because I can start over right now, that is much easier…I think the age factor was a crucial thing in making my decision. For me it is a positive thing... It was, because my first experience I watched my mom, she divorced my father after twenty two years, she was in her forties, and she had nothing. And I saw the problems in their marriage coming up in my own marriage, and I was really scared. For me I was like I see things going in this direction, I better get out now.

For Gertrude, 48, age did not really matter because, according to her, one can marry, divorce, or get other problems at any age:

You know you can get those problems at any age. Those problems can come at any age; you don't have an age to get married, you don't have an age to get problems, you don't have an age to get divorced. When you get the feeling that you get someone who might be good to you, you decide to get married. The age doesn't matter.

Most of the women therefore considered their ages as an advantage, a resource upon which they relied.

4.3.5 Comfortable Being Single Women

Realizing Personal Growth

The participants recognized personal strengths that they had not known before; they realized that they could do many things by themselves. They had become self reliant, and in charge of their lives, and this increased their self-esteem. They felt better about themselves and their new lifestyles. Virginia expressed that she was comfortable with her current lifestyle.

> Once I started fully supporting myself again, and regaining the confidence that I was capable of relying entirely on myself, I have settled back into the ideal that I can do this on my own. It would be nice to have someone to share my life with, but I'm okay alone too.

Brittany saw herself being able to do more than other people could, and she had been able to stand for herself against her ex-partner. The sky was the limit for her.

> But now I see what I am doing, and I don't think everybody could do it. Now I feel I could do anything, really. Having three jobs and going to school and raising a great kid; the sky is the limit really. And just the power to not believe him anymore... I don't believe him.

Mona felt able to do whatever needed to be done because she had been raised to be independent. She stated that she was comfortable being single:

> Well you see I am not a weak person, not because of my size or anything but I was raised to be independent, and I like being alone. I'm comfortable being alone, not that I like being alone, but I'm comfortable being along.

On Dating and Re-partnering

Only two of the participants stated that they were dating at the time. All the others stated that they were currently busy, or they were not interested in dating and re-partnering. Most of them were open to the possibility of having a relationship in the future, but they were not looking for partners at the time. Ruth was one of those who stated that they would not get into any relationships until their children were grown and out of the house.

I would not have a relationship, I don't think until my children are grown and out of the house. I pray for a husband ... and I just kind of feel like this is not gonna happen till after my children are grown and moved out of the house.

Rachel stated that she wanted to take her time before getting into another intimate relationship. She said:

Yeah, I have actually felt a lot of pressure from my family that maybe it's time for me to find someone. From family and friends, and I don't know, I feel differently about the way they think about me. It's probably out of concern, but I'm sure I want to move at my own phase. I want to move at a phase that is comfortable for me. And yes I know time is not waiting I'm growing older (laughter) but still I want to move on my own phase and I want to be sure of what I'm getting into. I don't want to just get into anything just for the sake of having someone so.

Nelly, however, stated that she did not want to get married again: "But I don't feel the need for the presence of a man in my life... For me I don't think I will go back and get married."

For the participants, this was a sign of growth because they realized that they could live happily without partners, and they could take care of their children on their own. Some had made a decision that they will get into an intimate relationship at the time that would be suitable for them to do so. Others were open to living as single women for the rest of their lives.

Always in Charge

Eight of the participants, of whom some had lived as single women before marriage, others who had been in cohabiting relationships, and others whose husbands did not take family responsibilities, continued doing what they had always done. They had always been in charge of

most of their family responsibilities. Mona married late, and she was used to performing all family tasks. In reference to her experience she stated:

> I did the bills, and I took care of the car, that's how my dad raised me. I had to know how to do the work on my cars; I had to learn how to do laundry. I had to learn how to cook, and I had to do everything. My ex-husband was allowed to do his job, go on his trips that he had to go because he is in the military... if I did not ever have control of my vehicle or my financial "security" I would not be able to think straight... I have to know all that to be able to function strongly, and that's what my dad succeeded in teaching me well. I had to know how to cut the grass... and it's not that I want to be in control of all situations, but I am. I am in control of me.

Celeste had also been raised to be independent, and had lived as a single mother before her second marriage. She was in charge of most of the family responsibilities during her marriage. This was her statement on her experiences:

> Let me tell you because with the economics I was supporting the house. Because my mother taught me you have to be always the leader; I was doing the same, and he was comfortable with that.... I was supporting the family. It was because of me, not for him, he was just comfortable, nice. But I never felt that I was doing a sacrifice. It is something that I have always done; it was not a problem for me. Supporting the house is not a problem.

It was the same kind of experience for Brittany who was had been in a cohabiting relationship, but also grew up learning to take responsibility of different family tasks. She said:

I feel like a breadwinner, even though I have always been like a tomboy. So I have always felt like, I don't want to say a little masculine, but I have always felt like, for example I took my first job when I was fourteen. So I've never really been one to just want to be in the kitchen only. The only time he had a job...even then I always paid the rent. He could send money home but it was never very much, maybe like a hundred dollars...even though he was working, I was doing more than half the work... So I have never really relied on him.

The participants realized personal growth, that they were able to continue with their lives without partners, and that they had the ability to do whatever they wanted. They were comfortable being single mothers, and heads of their families.

4.4 Experienced Challenges

The participants were faced by challenging experiences during the divorce or separation period. They had to deal with this life changing event; they were challenged by the lack of finances soon after divorce and as a result of the prevailing economic situation which was examined in the differing cultural experiences on page 53; they lost support; parenting after divorce or separation was challenging; and living the single life as divorced or separated mothers was not easy. They experienced being stuck, and taking over all the family responsibilities was a challenge for some, but not for others.

4.4.1 Experiences of the Divorce or Separation Period

The participants were confronted by negative emotions during the period of divorce and separation. This was a difficult time for them because they experienced psychological distress regardless of their age.

Queen articulated her experience accordingly: "It's been a roller coaster of emotions going up and down, and for a while there was depression. And there is that feeling of, 'oh my God, what am I going to do?' you know. Nelly had been a single mother for some years before she got married, but this did not make the experience of divorce easier for her. She said:

> And even the only thing that is so different for me, I lost a lot of my self esteem. I lost a lot of that because before that I was a very strong woman with everything. But now I feel like I am kind of weak, like I have never been before, even when I raised my daughter by myself, and all the time we were together. But after divorce I feel like, maybe for the case, and whatever happened, and the way I was treated by my ex-husband. But I feel like I lost a lot of self esteem, and I became insecure as well.

The challenge for these women was to transcend these emotions and continue with their lives, even though their dreams of a family had been crushed. They also had their children to look after, regardless of whatever they were going through. Margaret expressed her experience of the divorce period in these words:

> So for many months after that he and I struggled with the question of, 'can I get past this?' Because my whole life view was that I was marrying once, that I was very committed to my marriage and my vows, and that I had two amazing children by this man, and that I need to be committed to this marriage... I didn't know whether I could go past it... Although at the time it was the most devastation I could ever possibly imagine. This was the biggest obstacle I have ever overcome in my life...So all I know is I was a mom for that period of time... I took care of the kids' needs, and health and schooling, and I completely ignored myself... and all I was doing was focusing on my kids.

These women had to deal with difficult emotions, it was a trying time for them, but they came out of it stronger, and able to carry on with their lives.

4.4.2 Financial Challenges

Faced with the lack of money, and with no place to live, the participants found their lives quite challenging after divorce or separation. Most of them walked out of their marriages with nothing, or had to survive with very little. Debbie expressed her experience during this challenging time in her life. Like many of the participants, she had to start over.

> At the beginning when I left I didn't have anywhere to go. I didn't have anything, I didn't have any money. Money was the biggest problem, I had nothing, and he had taken all the money... Yet it would have certainly helped if I had that big chunk of money. And yeah it almost makes me sick when I think about all that I put my money into as a family. I had put a lot of money into a retirement account, and we really tried hard, but it makes me kind of sick to think of all we had acquired all those years (laughter).

Celeste left her marriage when she was poor, and had to live in a poor neighborhood where her daughter picked up some negative influence from youths who were involved in gangs. Celeste and her daughter moved to a different state, but at the time of the study they were still dealing with the effects of living in the poor neighborhood. She stated:

> ...my second divorce made me really poor, with nothing. I had to start from zero, and I never got any help from him economically...we got really poor after the divorce. I was living with two other ladies in a house. We were living in a bedroom smaller than this, me and my daughter. And we were sleeping in the same bed... And

we were living in a neighborhood like that, and I was really concerned because I realized that my daughter was getting that culture, that thinking... I realized how bad was the decision to marry that guy, because we lived in a very bad neighborhood...

Nelly went into marriage without debts, but she left with a lot of debt which she still had, and she was unemployed at the time of the study. Her marriage made her life more difficult than it was before. She stated:

Another thing, before I was married I had no debt, but when I left him I left with a lot of debt. And the debts were getting worse even as divorced I kept the debt...And unfortunately when I walked out of the house I didn't have any money at all, because I deposited all my money in his account and he managed all the money. Before I was managing my own money but he took all the money, even though I didn't make big money, but I was working okay, and he kept everything.

These women lived challenging lives after divorce or separation. They had to deal with emotional, financial and physical challenges, and this was quite taxing to their health and well-being.

4.4.3 Lack of Support

Another challenge that faced the participants was the lack of support from people in their lives, whom they expected would support them, and the lack of suitable support groups. Participants expressed the lack of support from the friends they had acquired during their marital relationships. These friends disappeared during the divorce or separation period. This is what Virginia said regarding her friends:

My friends, interestingly enough, because I am the one who initiated the separation, my friends all allied with ... my friends were very angry with me ... Actually with the exception of one close

friend that I had in high school my circle of friends pretty much dropped off…interestingly enough I lost most of my friends...

Gertrude expressed that her lawyer was not supportive during the divorce proceedings. She felt alone and had to do everything by herself. This is what she said:

> My lawyer maybe knew that but he didn't want to help me because throughout the divorce proceedings he never said anything. He never called me to tell me what we needed to talk about, what was going to happen, how I should answer questions. He never explained me anything. Every time I called the lawyer he took the clock and counted the minutes for the conversation.

Participants also expressed the lack of support groups for divorced and separated women. Some of them looked for suitable support groups to join during their time of need, but did not find any. They expressed how helpful it would be to meet with others who had similar experiences with them. Judy expressed this need when she said: "… sometimes you just need the support of other single parents. Like sometimes you think that you are the only one going through it, but there is always someone else who has kids and trying to go to school."

4.4.4 Parenting after Divorce or Separation

Parenting after divorce was a challenge for the participants. Those who had male children did not have a male figure for them to emulate, or someone who could talk to them about male concerns. Joyce expressed this challenge when she said.

> ...suddenly you find yourself playing both roles as father and mother. Things are different. I have to tell my son, or talk to his dad and tell him: 'He needs this from you and you need to get closer to him. And you need to make sure you point out this and that',

and he does ... And my daughter, I try to have that time. There are some things only a woman can teach a woman. But when you are yourself in that situation, and there is not the other gender, you have to deal with the situation. And there are times when you have to ask for advice from another male. But you really need to feel very comfortable talking about decisions because some of them concern your kids and you need to be sure to whom you want to ask...

Those who had female children did not have an easy time either because there were times and places where daughters needed their fathers. These were challenging moments for the participants as stated by Rachel:

I think there is always an element where a girl always wants to have her dad around. For example in school when they had father-daughter dances, sometimes she wanted to go but her father was not there. So she went with friends and danced with friends and their fathers, and that was very heartbreaking to me, yeah, that was heartbreaking.

These women found themselves with the challenge of being role models to their children, regardless of whether they were male or female. Virginia gave a good example of how she was a role model for her son:

I need to give him the ability to see that this is what people do; they go out and take care of their families. And you know while my sister was there when I needed her, I am perfectly capable of getting a job, and getting my own place, and I need to make sure that he understands that, because you know at some point he is going to have to be responsible for his own well-being, supporting himself, and maybe supporting a family. And I think it is really important that he see that I can do that too.

It was challenging for mothers who had teenage children at the time of the divorce or separation. Participants expressed how their children were affected; some changed their behaviors and became difficult for the single mothers to deal with. Lydia explained the situation with her daughter in the aftermath of the divorce:

> The transition of my daughter was hard when she moved here without daddy, and just with me, and was with me working many hours in the business. Of course I was lacking in paying attention to her when she was a teenager. That was very, very challenging because she got involved with… a bad group and she went drinking. And they put her under house arrest for one year. And she went to therapy for alcoholics or whatever, and they helped her a lot. The community service I had … for that I'm so happy and now she is good; she has overcome that... It was very hard, that was hard. I think she was trying to relieve all that pain she had probably accommodated for all these years to adjust, that's what happened. I asked her to go to counseling but she never liked to do it, so I could not force her. But I guess that experience for her, and the way I reacted with her, because I asked for help from police. They asked me: 'You want to put her in jail?' And put her there for two weeks, and put her on house arrest for one year. So that helped a lot.

4.4.5 Being Single after Divorce or Separation

These women had the normal desire for companionship, and acknowledged that they missed the kind of companionship they had in their marriages. Meme stated this in a few words, "...the hardest part is dealing with the need for affection, and that is my hardest struggle." Celeste was quite elaborate in expressing what she missed as a divorced woman. Her words also reflected the painful experience that made her leave the husband she loved so much.

> I think sometimes I miss him, but I don't forgive him. That is why I miss him, but immediately I hate him. Because he was a man who was really nice with me, he was a man who was calm, just talking to me. And he was really a very funny guy, and we were living really nicely and when I am by myself here in the bedroom I miss him, then immediately I hate him...Yes, I feel different. I'm going to tell you why. When I was married my relationship with my husband was really nice... but as a divorced woman I can tell you because my relationship with my husband was good, because we were talking and we were happy... just living together, and really truly just being together... He was always in the chair because he was older, and always smoking and doing the same thing. And this same thing is the thing that I'm missing... my daughter is always with me, but it is different. I think that is the big difference with me.

The participants expressed how it was difficult not to have someone they could talk to at a personal level, one with whom they could share their lives. They expressed the need to have a committed intimate relationship with someone whom they knew would always be there for them and their children. Brittany put it this way:

> You always have that person there for you who want to spend time with you. It is different from just having friends, either of different or the same sex with you, that you can hang out with. But this person is committed to you and you always want that.

The participants missed companionship, yet most of them were not interested in dating or re-partnering any time soon, but were open to this possibility in the future. The participants had settled into a challenging lifestyle as single women after divorce.

4.4.6 The Experience of Being Stuck

But these women, because they had young children, had another challenging aspect of their single lives to deal with. It was difficult for some of them to find a balance between being mothers, and pursuing personal interests. This challenge was expressed by mothers who wanted to go back to school, but realized that it was not possible for them to do so at the time. They had to take care of their children, and this was more important for them, until they graduated from high school. Mona called this 'the experience of being stuck', because she wanted to go back to complete college, but could not do so.

> But now my energy goes to my child. I want to finish my school, I really want to finish my school, but if I don't sign up for school within 2009, all my credits are gone. I can't afford school; I can't go to school at night. Yes because of my child. He is more important, he is much more important. So the experience of being "stuck" and not being able to do anything for myself absolutely makes me sad, but being a mother, mother is absolutely number one… I would rather be a single mother than be in school to complete my degree. But I want to finish my school; I might have to start all over again. I will. I will, some day, I will. Maybe I will have to wait for seven years when he is done with high school. And at that time I will already be 54, and I will be paying for his college. I would rather be a mother than studying now. So I feel stuck...

Ruth's statement shows a similar experience, and confirms what Mona and others had experienced.

> I've been thinking very seriously about going back to school...Yea I would like to do that, it's just the stress, and the strain you know; and kind of I don't have that strength...The kids these days require so much, they try to be involved in school ac-

tivities, so that keeps me running here and there you know. So I don't see where I can put in my schedule right now.

Rachel, who was working on her master's degree, and had planned to continue and get a doctorate, found that she could not follow her dream because she needed to take care of her daughter's educational needs. She stated:

> ...but then I have also realized that as much as I want more education... the way I'm thinking now is different because now I think to myself, if I were to go back to school full time, In a few years' time my child is to go to college. So this probably is not a time for me to be. I have actually told myself that this is not the right time for me to be concentrating about my education, it is time for me to think about her education and then maybe what I had done I will still keep all those years.

These women had enough to deal with on daily basis, and with their main focus being children, they found it difficult to pursue their own interests while their children were still young. Bringing up their children was a duty and a priority; and they postponed their individual dreams.

4.4.7 Taking over all Family Responsibilities

There was a notable difference between the participants regarding taking over all family responsibilities. This was another challenge faced by seven of the participants. They realized that being divorced or separated meant that they were the heads of their families, and that they were responsible for everything. It was difficult for these women when they realized that they were the only adults in their families, and there was no one else to talk with, adult to adult. There was nobody else they could share responsibilities with; they had to completely rely on themselves. Rachel expressed this situation when she said:

It basically means that I'm responsible for everything; and it also means that I don't have somebody to call if I'm running late to say, 'could you go and pick her up because I'm going to be late?' It means that I have to be there on time to pick her up if she is somewhere. And there is a lot of pressure sometimes and it means that there are some jobs I cannot take, just like going to school. There are some jobs that I cannot take because I'm thinking 'what is happening to her?' Someone needs to be taking care of her so there are some restrictions that come with that title.

Taking on all family responsibilities was particularly difficult for those who had not done some tasks before, and those who left their husbands to do particular tasks during marriage. Debbie found it very hard to find car insurance for herself, and to take care of her car when it broke down on the road. She stated:

I moved in pretty much like my parents into a marriage where the man likes to take care of everything, so he took care of everything. So I never really made those adult decisions and responsibilities, and I didn't realize that throughout my whole marriage. And even the divorce thing, I never even really thought about it until I actually moved out. And when I moved out, I went like oh my God, I have to deal with all this, and I don't know how to deal with small things like getting my car insurance. ... I was like twenty six and I was living that eighteen year old life again, like moving out, and learning how to deal with all these things, like budgeting. It was so dramatic for me because I had never ever done these things.

The participants needed time to adjust to the new responsibilities, and to try to fit the work of two people into one person's schedule. This was Joyce's experience when she realized that she needed to be at two different schools at the same time.

I needed time to settle down and adjust to things because yes there were a lot of things we had to adjust to. Very simple things like meetings at school, sometimes they were overlapping. In the past we didn't have any problems because he was going to one, and I went for the other, but suddenly I felt bad because I had to miss at least one of the meetings. I couldn't go for all of them, I had three, and I could only go for two. At school they were accommodating, they understood the situation, and they started conferences through phone conference, so that felt better. But still when they have any other thing at school going on sometimes I can't go and it makes me feel bad, but I can't be in three different places at the same time and they understand. And they know that they are the priority.

Life challenges after divorce and separation were difficult for all the participants, regardless of their ages, except the eight who had no problem continuing with family responsibilities. They all found the period after divorce or separation to be very challenging. They experienced the lack of support at a time when they needed it most. They lost their spouses, friends and the family unit. They expressed that walking out of marriage without money, or a place to live in with their children, made their lives more difficult. Some of them who wanted to further their education could not because they had fulltime responsibility for their children.

4.5 Chapter Summary

The results of data analysis showed two common social cultural perspectives namely divorce is common as well as the experience of being judged, stereotyped, and stigmatized. The differing social cultural perspectives were the acceptance of single mothers in their communities, religion and spirituality, and the experience of the prevailing economic

situation. Learned family values were the only shared familial perspective, while the presence of fathers in the lives of their children and children's role in their parents' divorce were different. The themes on individual experiences: Change, growth, and challenges were similar among all the participants, except there were differences in the sub-theme of taking over all family responsibilities, and these were presented last in the chapter.

5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to utilize the psychological phenomenological approach in order to understand and describe the lived experiences of divorced and separated single mothers. Studies show that compared to married, cohabiting, and never married women, divorced and separated mothers: (a) experience more adversity in life (Cairney, Boyle, Offord, & Richie, 2003; Turner, 2006); (b) are more vulnerable to mental health problems (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006; Cairney, Pevalin, Wade, Veldhuizen, & Arboleda-Florez, 2006); and, (c) are the least satisfied with life (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2004; Bailey & Snyder, 2007; Evans & Kelly, 2004; Stutzer & Frey, 2006).

The following is a discussion of the findings of this study according to three categories that were found in the reviewed literature. (1) The causes of divorce and separation. (2) The effects of divorce or separation. (3) Important resources for divorced and separated single mothers. Following this section, new discoveries found in this study are shared.

5.1 Causes of Divorce and Separation

Among the reasons for divorce and separation found by this study were physical or emotional abuse, infidelity, lack of emotional support, lack of commitment, loss of trust, alcohol or substance abuse, poor communication, problems sharing family responsibilities, loss of self-

esteem, desire for independence, change in marital ideals, and lack of preparation for marriage. These causes of divorce and separation were found in the reviewed literature (Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005; Molina, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

5.2 Effects of Divorce and Separation

This study found both negative and positive effects of divorce and separation. Among the negative effects were the emotional experiences during divorce or separation, and soon after, the breakup of the family unit, loss of social and parenting support, loss of a partner, financial hardship, mental health concerns, and effects on the children. The positive effects included a better lifestyle, healing, and growth.

5.2.1 Negative Effects

The reviewed literature showed that divorce or separation is a life changing event which causes a lot of distress to those concerned (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006), particularly in the first two years (Hetherington, 2003). The divorce or separation period was very challenging to the participants in this study. They acknowledged experiencing emotions such as depression, uncertainty, loneliness, ambivalence towards the divorce, guilt, blame, social stigma, and being judged. These findings were similar to those in the reviewed literature (Molina, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Stewart, 2005; Thomas & Ryan, 2005).

The participants in this study, like the general population, valued marriage and the preservation of the family unit. Therefore being divorced or separated meant that they contradicted these values, and they had failed in observing social norms. This could have led to the experiences of guilt, blame, being judged and social stigma, findings which were similar to those of Schneller and Arditti (2004).

The women in this study lost support from most of their friends, acquaintances, and family members as a result of divorce or separation; which was similar to the findings of Hetherington (2003) and Thomas and Ryan (2008). At the time of this study most of the participants were establishing a new network of friends, a sign of growth. The importance of social support networks and individual friendships in helping individuals and families adapt to divorce or separation was emphasized by Krumei, Colt, Martin, Fogo, and Mahoney (2007), and Greef, Vansteenwegen, and DeMot, (2006). Some of the women in this study recognized that their children were a source of support and inspiration for them during the difficult period of divorce or separation and its aftermath (Hughes, 2007; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

Parenting after divorce or separation was challenging to the participants because of the loss of a complementary role model for their children, and the combined effort in disciplining them, particularly teenagers. Eight of the mothers had teenage children (five of these were the only children), and four of the mothers (one of whom had an only child, an adolescent) expressed that they had difficulties in disciplining them. According to Lara-Cinisomo and Griffin (2007), parents with only adolescent children were more likely to experience more parenting distress compared to those with at least one younger child. Molina (2004) also stated that some mothers had difficulties disciplining their children without the help of their fathers.

Two of the participants had their children incarcerated at one point, and another stated that living in a poor neighborhood where there were gangs and drugs had affected her child's behavior. This corresponds to the findings of Harper and McLanahan (2004) that children from low social economic families where the father was absent were at a higher risk for being incarcerated. According to Lara-Cinisomo and Griffin (2007), and Kotchick, Dorsey, and Heller (2005), living in poor neigh-

borhoods caused mental distress, which affected mother-child relationship, and disciplining procedures.

The participants lost the company of an intimate partner, a person with whom to share family responsibilities (Ryan &Thomas, 2008). Seven of the participants found some of the day-to-day family responsibilities quite challenging because they had never taken them on before. The participants expressed that having to be the only ones taking care of their children at all times was a challenge because it occupied most of their time.

Some of the women in this study stated that they chose to walk away with nothing instead of fighting to get a share of the financial assets they had acquired together during the marital relationship. For these women, maintaining a good relationship with their ex-partners, for the sake of their children, was more important than financial gain. This was similar to the reviewed literature (Andreß & Bröckel, 2007; Clark, Diener, Georgellis & Lucas, 2006) that although women suffer more financial loss compared to men; this does not have much effect on their life satisfaction after divorce, compared to men, because they value other changes in their lives more.

The participants in this study perceived their children as suffering from the consequences of divorce or separation. The children suffered emotionally, some had behavioral changes, and their academic performance and social well-being were affected. These negative effects of divorce and separation on children were similar to those in the reviewed literature (Beivk & Olweus, 2006; Hetherington, 2003; Harper, & McLanahan, 2004; Pan & Farrell, 2006; Portnoy, 2008; Weitoft, Hjern, Huglund, & Rosen, 2003).

There were children in this study whose fathers were absent from their lives. According to the reviewed literature (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Zimmerman, Brown, & Portes, 2004), quality time with non-custodial parents contributed greatly to the children's

well-being. Therefore these children did not receive the benefits of having time with their fathers.

The negative experiences expressed by some of the participants in this study: adversity, financial hardship, and lack of support have been identified as causing mental health concerns among divorced and separated women (Butterworth & Rogers, 2007; Harknett, 2006; Hetherington, 2003; Mason, 2003; Portnoy, 2008; Turner, 2006).

5.2.2 Positive Effects of Divorce and Separation

Most of the participants stated that they had better lifestyles which were characterized by less stress, independence, being in control of their lives, improved health, improved self-image, and having quality time with their children. These findings show the positive side of divorce and separation, and that these women had the capacity to grow and prevail over the difficult experience of divorce and separation (Baum, Rahav, & Sharon, 2005; Molina, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008; Stewart, 2005).

One participant in this study stated that her divorce process was smooth, and that she transitioned without many problems, because she had gone through the difficult experiences before the divorce actually occurred. This had been established among other divorced or separated participants in the reviewed literature (Baum, Rahav, & Sharon, 2005; Sakraida, 2005; Thomas & Ryan, 2008; Zimmerman, Brown, & Portes, 2004).

The participants in this study recognized growth in their lives, like the women in the study by Ryan and Thomas (2008). Most of the women in this study had been divorced for five or fewer years and they said that they were still adjusting. There were three participants who had been divorced for seven or more years and they said they were over it. This corresponds to the finding of Hetherington (2003), that it takes about six years to overcome the effects of divorce or separation.

Another aspect of growth among the participants was that they were willing to get into intimate relationships in the future, and that they were comfortable alone too. Only two women, one had been divorced for one year and the other for one and a half years, were dating at the time of this study. Others stated that they were too busy to date, or that they would do so after their children graduated from high school. Some said that they were taking their time, and would date when they felt ready, or met the right person. One participant stated that she would never marry again, which corresponds to the findings of other studies that divorced and separated persons may lose confidence to get into intimate relationships (Hetherington, 2003; Molina, 2005; Sakraida, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

5.3 Important Resources

5.3.1 Education, Employment, and Income

Some of the women in this study had a good education before they got married, but many went back to school before the divorce or separation. At the time of this study, six of the women were bachelor's or master's students, and the three who had no degrees expressed their desire to go back to school. This was in accord with the findings of the reviewed literature that women went back to school in order to improve their ability to take care of themselves and their children (Andreß & Bröckel, 2007; Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005). These women stated that education increased their self-esteem; it helped them to think logically, to find resources when they needed them, and to get employment and an income that gave them a standard lifestyle. These findings are similar to those of Thomas and Ryan (2008).

Participants who were employed expressed gratitude for their jobs and benefits, but they also emphasized the need for well-paying jobs for single mothers. Those who were unemployed expressed their desire to

be employed and the effort they were putting into finding jobs. Studies show that employment enhances mothers' well-being (Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007; Mason, 2003; Curtis & Phipps, 2004). Mothers' employment status and income were also related to children's well-being and school performance (Kalil & Ziol-Guest, 2005; Mason, 2003), which implies that the children of the unemployed participants in this study may have suffered similar effects. The single mothers in this study were happy to get paid work, but they were also likely to leave the job if it did not pay enough to provide for their needs as was found by Mason (2003).

By going back to school these women demonstrated the importance of a college education in maintaining mental health, getting employment, income, and in helping families to adapt after divorce or separation. The importance of these factors has been emphasized in the reviewed literature (Afifi, Cox, & Enns, 2006; Crosier, Butterworth & Rogers, 2007; Greef, Vansteenwegen, & DeMot, 2006; Gruber, 2004; Jackson, Bentler, & Franke, 2006; Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007; Mason, 2003; Segal-Engelchin & Wozner, 2005).

Most of the participants in this study used counseling services. Some had couples counseling before the divorce or separation, and others sought counseling for themselves and their children after divorce or separation, which corresponds to the findings of Cairney, Boyle, Lipman, Racine (2004), and Portnoy (2008) that divorced families utilized psychiatric services more than other types of families due to their vulnerability to mental health problems.

Personal strengths were very important in dealing with the day to day challenges, as well as in dealing with difficult experiences. The participants in this study were able to articulate their personal strengths and abilities such as diligence, gratitude, self-esteem, a positive attitude, determination, and education. Although most of the women in this study were still adjusting to their new status, they felt empowered, and they

were happy with their lifestyles. Eight of them stated that they had always been responsible for most family responsibilities, that they had always been in control of their lives, and that they were happy as single women. This corresponds to the findings of Segal-Engelchin and Wozner (2005), that being in control of one's life, the independence gained after divorce or separation, together with a good education and employment, make it possible for divorced and separated women to live well-adjusted fulfilling lifestyles.

5.4 New Findings

The unique findings of this study are discussed in three categories: (1) Divorced and separated single mothers in society which situates the participants in the place and the historical period at the time of the study. (2) Divorced and separated single-mother families, an examination of these families as they existed in their communities and the society. (3) Divorced and separated single mothers as individuals, an examination of their lives in society as they interacted with other people.

5.4.1 Divorced and Separated Single Mothers in Society

The participants in this study lived in society and responded to the socioeconomic events of the time as anyone else would. There were ethnic differences in how these women experienced the prevailing economic situation. The Caucasian participants were future-oriented in their concerns about losing their jobs or having salary cuts, so they saved money in case this happened. The African American participants were present-oriented. Except for one who was unemployed, they were grateful for having their jobs, and they were content with what they had. The Latino participants were oriented to the past, and talked about businesses, jobs or finances that they had lost. They also acknowledged that the situation was affecting everybody else and not just themselves. This was

a way of coping by thinking about what they had been able to do and acquire in the past, which gave them hope of succeeding in the future when the economy improved. Lydia, the Latino participant who was on social welfare regarded it as a kind of insurance, or a form of tax refund from the government. The women who had lost their jobs acknowledge that they were not the only ones affected, and their attitudes were positive.

This study showed that divorced and separated single mothers were common, and more accepted in the African American community, compared to the Caucasian and Latino communities. However, participants from all three communities expressed the importance of preserving marriage and the family unit. These findings show that even though divorce and separation were common in the society, and the African American community accepted single mothers, marriage and the preservation of the family unit were still valued by most of the participants. Therefore, divorce and separation were contrary to social norms and expectations, which led to experiences of social stigma and being judged, regardless of the ethnic community to which the participants belonged.

As members of society the participants made choices to join particular social and religious groups. Some, especially the African American and the Latino divorced single mothers, belonged to established religious organizations which provided spiritual comfort and support to them. Some looked for support groups where they met others with similar experiences, and others utilized friendships and social support networks.

This study found that there was need for support groups for divorced and separated single mothers. Some of the participants observed the lack of support groups that were geared towards the needs of divorced and separated women, such as the loss of self-esteem, while considering their ages, cultural, and religious backgrounds.

5.4.2 Divorced and Separated Single-Mother Families

From the perspectives of the participants in this study, the absence of fathers in the lives of their children was more common among African American single-mother families than among Caucasian single-mother families. The African American women expressed that the fathers of their children were not really involved with them, even during the marital relationships. These women always took the responsibility of their children, but they received financial child support from their ex-partners.

Most of the participants stated that they had quality time with their children, and that there was less stress since their ex-partners were no longer present in the family home. Most of the Latino and Caucasian participants stated that they terminated their marital relationships in order to make sure their children had a better life, to protect them from abusive fathers, or because they realized that their ex-partners did not want to have children. The African American participants continued to take care of their children knowing that they were the only ones responsible for them since their ex-partners had not been involved in taking family responsibilities.

5.4.3 Divorced and Separated Single Mothers as Individuals

The divorced and separated women in this study focused on being mothers and on their children. After divorce and separation, the women in this study switched their focus from being wives and mothers, to being mothers only, and their children became their focal point. The children gave them their identity as mothers, and they described raising their children as a fulfilling experience. The children were a source of strength and inspiration for their mothers, kept their mothers going, and provided the reason for their lives.

The participants in this study emphasized the importance of moving or relocating in order to promote emotional closure and psychological

well-being. Moving to an apartment or a house or to a faraway place was symbolic of leaving their old lives behind. In their new places they met new people and started over. They became independent, and in control of their lives. Participants who could not relocate expressed their desire to do so. One participant redecorated her house in order to facilitate change symbolically. These women were their own agents in facilitating their own well-being by moving away from what was not good for them and toward what would promote their well-being.

The participants in this study expressed a concern about the tendency for people to give blanket stereotypes to all divorced and separated women. They wanted to be seen as individuals, and they expressed their disagreement with the given stereotypes. They wanted to be recognized for who they were and for their achievements. They were advocating for themselves so that they may be more comfortable as members of society. They also wanted people to know that divorce is transitional, it happens to people, but they move on with their lives.

The women in this study had no regrets that they made the decision to divorce or separate. They had done all they could to save their marital relationships, and when they left, they were ready to face the next step in their lives. The respondents of the divorce or separation realized the benefit of ending a relationship that was not in their favor. The only regret expressed by some participants was not seeking marital help early enough, which could have either saved their marriages, or helped them to make the decision to leave earlier instead of staying so long in a relationship that did not work.

5.5 Implications for the Mental Health Profession

As a mental health professional I learned several things that are important for those in the mental health profession to consider when working with divorced and separated single mothers. First, it is critical to find out when clients went through the divorce or separation. During the first

two years it is important to find out whether or not the clients initiated the divorce or separation because literature shows that divorce or separation respondents have more difficulties adjusting (Sakraida, 2005; Thomas & Ryan, 2008; Zimmerman, Brown, & Portes, 2004). During these two years the clients might also be experiencing negative emotions such as depression, loneliness, and ambivalence which would need to be addressed.

Because the participants were given an opportunity to reflect during the interviews, they came to recognize strengths they had not recognized before. Counseling is a process of empowering clients and helping them to become their own agents in their healing. It is very likely that mothers may bring their children for counseling without considering their own needs. These mothers need to be given an opportunity to reflect on their lives, because often times during the counseling process they come to realize their own concerns that need to be addressed for their well-being and that of their children (Portnoy, 2008).

From this study I learned that it is important to let the person seeking help know that it is okay to talk about their religious faith and beliefs. People may hesitate to talk about religion and spirituality because it seems controversial in the United States. This was confirmed for me when one of the participants was talking about her faith and how God was helping her. She stopped in mid-sentence and stated that she hoped I didn't mind her talking about God. She wanted to know if it was okay for her to mention God during the interview. During counseling it is also helpful to let clients talk about their familial and social cultural values and what they mean for them; then the conflict between these values and being divorced or separated can be addressed. These are important aspects of multicultural counseling which call for openness and acceptance toward clients from different cultures and beliefs.

The lack of support for divorced and separated mothers still persisted at the time of this study, highlighting the need to establish support

groups for divorced and separated women. These groups would need to cater to the needs of different ages and different religious and cultural backgrounds. The women experienced the loss of self esteem during marriage and the transition period. They expressed the need to meet with people who have gone through the same experience, and to have mentors who can help them regain their self-esteem.

There is also need for family services geared towards the needs of adolescents and young adults in order to help them in transitioning to adulthood. These might address the difficulty experienced by divorced and separated mothers in disciplining their adolescent children, which was found in this study and in the reviewed literature (Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Kotchick, Dorsey, & Heller, 2005; Lara-Cinisomo & Griffin, 2007).

5.6 Implications for the Teaching Profession

Teachers need to know their students and their family backgrounds well in order to be able to help them if, for example they get low grades because of the consequences of parental divorce or separation. Knowing their students well will help the teachers to understand them when they have behavioral problems, so then they can discuss with their parents what can be done to help the children or they can refer them for counseling.

People need to know that not all divorced and separated women depend on welfare, and for those who do, it is because of need and the lack of alternatives. Society needs to be educated to understand these women for who they are, and regard them individually rather than as a group. Education might help people to develop empathy, rather than confrontation, for divorced and separated women.

It is also important for young people to be made aware of the need for preparation or counseling before for marriage which could address some of the pre-marital divorce risks stated in this study and in the re-

viewed literature (Hetherington, 2003; Lowenstein, 2005; Schneller & Arditti, 2004; Thomas & Ryan, 2008).

5.7 Recommendations for Further Research

The different cultural time orientations, past, present and future, which came from the experiences of the participants regarding the prevailing economic situation, has implications for the mental health profession. This needs to be investigated further to make sure that these differences in cultural time orientations do really exist. Finding out if the different cultural groups have these different orientations in interpreting their presenting problems might help to clarify the counseling approaches suitable for clients from the different cultural backgrounds. In practice, if a client has anxiety about the future he or she may be helped by the counselor to live the present moment, and to make plans to meet the desired goals for the future. If a client considers a problem as having its origin in the past, they might need to be helped to find their strengths to overcome the effects of the problem in the present moment and in the future.

From the perspective of the participants, especially the African Americans, fathers were not involved in the lives of their children. These women expressed their desire for the fathers of their children to exercise their father-role and be present in the lives of their children. An investigation into this concern might bring forth suggestions on what could be done to improve parenting relationships and responsibilities among African American fathers.

5.8 Conclusion

This study emphasized the importance of being mothers, and the place children hold in the lives of these divorced and separated women. The need for divorced and separated mothers to be recognized for who

they are, instead of being given a blanket label that does not fit most of the individual divorced or separated single mothers was important for the participants. Relocating or moving after divorce and separation was important in adjusting to the new life status and for promoting psychological well-being among divorced and separated women. The women in this study demonstrated the important role played by personal resources and inner strength in dealing with the difficult experience of divorce or separation and their aftermath. They also demonstrated this strength by their courage to tell their stories.

6

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7

APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix A Demographic Questionnaire

Today's date: _____

Identification number _____ Pseudonym _____

How old are you? _____

Please circle the statement that best describes your racial identification:

1. African American

2. Caucasian

3. Latino

4. Other (please specify) _____

Where were you born?

1. In the United States of America.

2. In another country (please specify), _____

If you were born in another country, for how many years have you been in the United States? _____

Please circle the highest level of education you have completed:

1. Elementary school.

2. High school.

3. Community College or Vocational training.
4. Bachelors degree.
5. Graduate degree.

Please indicate your current employment status:
1. Employed full time (40 or more hours a week).
2. Employed part time.
 3. Unemployed.

Approximately how much do you earn per month?
_____

How many people depend on your earnings? _____

For how many years were you married or cohabiting?
_____

For how many years have you been divorced or separated?
_____

Who initiated divorce or separation?
1. Myself.
2. My ex-spouse.
3. We both agreed to divorce/separate.

After divorce/separation/leaving, did you make use the following, or any other services?
1. Counseling services_____
2. Divorce education_____
3. Divorce support groups_____
4. Other _____
5. None_____

How many children do you have? _____
How many children 15 or younger live with you? _____

How old is your youngest child? _____

How old is your oldest child? _____

How many boys? _____ How many girls? _____

How many adolescents live with you? _____

Custodial status: _____   1. We have shared custody

_____   2. I am the sole custodian of my children

Do you get child support from the father of your child/children?

 1. Yes   2. No

As you were growing up, did you live in a single parent family for any length of time?   1. Yes   2. No.

Please select the living arrangement that best describes your current household:

1. Myself and my children only.

2. Myself, my children, and my parent(s).

4. Myself, my children, and relative(s).

5. Other – Please specify   _____

7.2 Appendix B: Interview Guide Questions

1. I am interested in learning about your experience of being a single mother who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship. Will you please share with me about your experience, feelings and emotions that are involved, and what these mean for you?

2. How is your life as a single mother who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship different from when you were living with your partner? Do people treat you in the same way as when you lived with your partner or differently?

3. In what ways has your experience as a single mother divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship made you stronger?

4. Is there anything you wish you had done differently?

5. What are your personal strengths as a divorced/separated single mother?

6. How did the divorce/separation affect your children /child? (Relationship with their father, their school performance, well-being, residential stability, etc.)

7. How does the presence of a child /children affect your life as a single woman who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship?

8. How would you describe yourself in terms of adapting to divorce /separation /leaving your partner and being more settled in your life?

9. What is the significance of the following for you as a single mother who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship?

> a) your age,
> b) your education,
> c) your spirituality,
> d) church,
> e) cultural background,
> f) your employment status,
> g) friends,
> h) family,
> i) children,
> j) social life
> k) your community
> l) Services and resources for divorce and separated women in the area

10. How does the current economic situation affect you as a single mother who is divorced or separated or formerly in a cohabiting relationship?

11. Did you experience any difference in gender roles and expectations in leaving your partner?

7.3 Appendix C: Themes and Sub-themes of the Lived Experiences of Divorced and Separated Single Mothers

5 Themes	41 Sub-themes	Number of Participants
1. Being a Mother	1. Children are everything to their mothers	13
	2. Children's role in their parents' divorce or separation	6
	3. Children were affected by divorce or separation	12
	4. Being a single parent	7
	5. Role models and teachers to their children	6
	6. Co-parenting after divorce or separation	7
	7. Shared custody and concerns	5
2. Transitional Experiences	8. Pre-marital experiences	8
	9. Causes of divorce	12
	10. During marriage and the divorce or separation period	8
	11. The experience of the divorce or separation event	12

	12. Financial losses	6
	13. Taking on family responsibilities	13
	14. Relocating means starting over	8
	15. Healing is a process	6
	16. Stronger now	9
	17. Thinking differently	6
	18. Adapting to divorce and moving on	12
	19. No regrets	9
	20. Experiences of being stuck	7
3. The New Lifestyle	21. A better lifestyle	7
	22. Independent	6
	23. Being single	10
	24. Dating and re-partnering	12
	25. Perceived judgments, stereotypes and stigma	9
	26. Different from the stereotypes	9
4. Social Cultural Perspectives	27. Cultural attitudes towards divorce and separation	6
	28. Divorce and separation in participant's family	10
	29. Parental models in participants' family of origin	10
	30. Learned traditional	7

family values

5. Helpful Resources	31. The importance of education	8
	32. Employment and income	9
	33. The prevailing economic situation	13
	34. Personal characteristics (attitudes, morals, strengths)	11
	35. Support from family	11
	36. Support from friends and acquaintances	13
	37. Support from ex-spouses	9
	38. Support groups	6
	39. Community resources	7
	40. The role of counseling	8
	41. God, faith, spirituality in the lives of participants	13

7.4 Appendix D: Participants, Themes and Sub-themes

Participants' Names Age, Ethnicity, and Status	Themes	Sub-themes
Queen, 29 African-American Divorced	Being a mother	- Children are everything to their mothers - Children were affected by divorce - Shared custody
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage - Causes of divorce and separation - Experiences of the divorce event - Taking over family responsibilities - Stronger now - Thinking differently - Adapting to divorce and moving on - Before the divorce or separation - During marriage and the divorce period

	New Lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- More freedom
		- Independence comes with responsibilities
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives Helpful Resources	- The importance of education
		- Employment and income
		- The prevailing economic situation
		- Support from family
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support groups
		- God, faith, spirituality
Judy, 30 African-American, Formerly cohabiting	Being a mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- Being a single parent
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage
		- Causes of Separation and separation
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Before and during the separation period
		- No regrets
	New Lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereo-

	Social Cultural Perspectives	types - Different from the stereotypes - Cultural attitudes towards divorce and separation - Divorce and separation in the family - Parental models in participant's family
	Helpful Resources	- The importance of education - Employment and income - Personal characteristics - Support from family - Support from friends and acquaintances - Support groups - Community resources - God, faith, spirituality
Rachel, 38 African-American, Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers - Children were affected by divorce - Being a single parent - Co-parenting
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage - Causes of divorce and separation - Experience of the divorce event - Taking over family responsibilities - Relocating means starting

	over
	- Stronger now
	- Adapting to divorce and moving on
	- No regrets
	- Being stuck
New Lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
	- Dating and re-partnering
	- Perceived judgments, stereotypes and stigma
	- Different from the stereotypes
Social Cultural Perspectives	- Cultural attitudes towards divorce
Helpful Resources	- Personal characteristics
	- Support from family
	- Support from friends and acquaintances
	- Support from ex-partners
	- Support groups
	- Community resources
	- The role of counseling
	- God, faith, spirituality

Ruth, 45 African- American, Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers - Children were affected by divorce - Role model and teacher to her children
	Transitional Experiences	- Before getting married - Causes of divorce and separation -Taking over family responsibilities - Stronger now - Thinking differently - Being stuck
	New Lifestyle	- Dating and re-partnering - Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Cultural attitudes towards divorce - Divorce and separation in the family - Parental models in participant's family
	Helpful Resources	- Employment - The prevailing economic situation - Support from family - Support from friends and acquaintances - Community resources - The role of counseling - God, faith, spirituality

Meme, 47 African-American, Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Being a single parent
	Transitional Experiences	- Before getting married
		- Causes of divorce and separation
		- Experience of the divorce event
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Healing is a process
		- Thinking differently
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- No regrets
	New Lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- More freedom
		- Being single
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes, stigma
		- Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Divorce and separation in mother's family
		- Parental models in participant's family
	Helpful Resources	- The importance of education
		- Employment and income
		- Personal characteristics
		- Support from family

		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-partner
		- The role of counseling
		- God, faith, spirituality
Lydia, 47 *Latina* *Divorced*	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Being a single parent
		- Co-parenting after divorce
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage
		- Experience of the divorce event
		- Financial losses
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Relocating means starting over
		- Healing is a process
		- Thinking differently
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- During marriage and before the divorce
		- Being stuck
	New lifestyle	- More freedom/ independent
		- Being single
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes
		- Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural	- Cultural attitudes towards di-

	Perspectives	vorce
		- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Parental models in participant's family
		- Learned traditional and religious family value
	Helpful Resources	- Personal characteristics
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-partner
		- The role of counseling
		- Support groups
		- God, faith, spirituality
Joyce, 47 *Latina* *Separated*	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Experience of being a single parent
		- Role model and teacher to her children
		- Co-parenting after separation
	Transitional Experiences	- Causes of divorce and separation
		- Experience of the divorce event
		- Taking over responsibilities
		- Healing is a process
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- No regrets

	New lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- Being single
		- Dating and re-partnering
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Parental models in participant's family
	Helpful Resources	- The prevailing economic situation
		- Personal characteristics
		- Support from family
		- Support groups
		- God, faith, spirituality
Gertrude, 48 Latina Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- The role of children in their parents' divorce/ separation
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Role models and teachers to their children
	Transitional Experiences	- Causes of divorce and separation
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Stronger now
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- During marriage and the divorce period
	Social Cultural	- Parental models in participant's

	Perspectives	family
		- Learned traditional/religious family values
		- The prevailing economic situation
	Helpful Resources	- Personal characteristics
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-partner
		- The role of counseling
		- God, faith, spirituality
Nelly, 48 *Latina* *Divorced*	Being a Mother	- Child was affected by divorce
		- The role of children in their parents' divorce/ separation
		- Role model to her child
	Transitional Experiences	- Causes of divorce and separation
		- Experience of the divorce event
		- Financial losses
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Relocating means starting over
		- Healing is a process
		- Stronger now
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- During marriage and the divorce period
	New lifestyle	- Being single
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereo-

		types, and stigma
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Cultural attitudes towards divorce
		- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Learned traditional and religious family
	Helpful Resources	- The prevailing economic situation
		- Personal characteristics
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- God, faith, spirituality
Celeste, 52 Latina Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- The role of children in their parents' divorce/ separation
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Being a single parent
	Transitional Experiences	- Experience of the divorce event
		- Financial losses
		- Taking over family responsibilities
		- Relocating means starting over
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- No regrets
	New lifestyle	- Being single
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes

		- Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Parental models in participant's family
		- Learned traditional/ religious family values
	Helpful Resources	- The importance of education
		- Employment and income
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- The role of counseling
		- God, faith, spirituality
Debbie, 27 Caucasian Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- The role of children in their parents' divorce or separation
		- Children were affected by divorce
		- Being a single parent
		- Role model and teacher to her children
		- Co-parenting
		- Shared Custody concerns
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage
		- Causes of divorce and separation
		- Experience of the divorce event
		- Financial losses
		- Taking over family responsibility

		- Relocating means starting all over
		- Healing is a process
		- Stronger now
		- Thinking differently
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- During marriage and the divorce period
		- No regrets
	New lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- More freedom
		- Being single
		- Thinking differently
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes
		- Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Different from the stereotypes
		- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Parental models in participant's family
		- Learned traditional and religious family values
	Helpful Resources	- Employment and income
		- Support from family
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-partners
		- The role of counseling

Brittany, 27 *Caucasian* *Formerly* *Cohabiting*	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers - The role of children in their parents' divorce or separation - Role models and teachers to their children - Custody concerns - Co-parenting after divorce
	Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage - Causes of divorce and separation - Experiences of the divorce or separation event - Taking over family responsibilities - Stronger now - Adapting to divorce and moving on - No regrets - Being stuck
	New lifestyle	- A better lifestyle - Being single - Dating and re-partnering - On being single - Perceived judgments, stereotypes - Different from the stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Parental models in participant's family - Learned traditional and religious family values

	Helpful Resources	- Employment and income - Support from family - Support from friends and acquaintances - Support from ex-partners - Support groups - Community resources - God, faith, spirituality
Margaret, 35 *Caucasian* *Divorced*	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers - Children were affected by divorce or separation - Being a single parent - Co-parenting after divorce - Shared custody and concerns
	Transitional Experiences	- Causes of divorce and separation - The experience of the divorce or separation event - Financial losses - Relocating means starting over - Healing is a process - Stronger now - Thinking differently - Adapting to divorce and moving on - During marriage and the divorce period - No regrets - Being stuck

	New lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- More freedom
		- Dating and re-partnering
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Divorce and separation in the family
		- The importance of education
	Helpful Resources	- Employment and income
		- Personal characteristics and values
		- Support from family
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-partners
		- The role of counseling
		- God, faith, spirituality
Mona, 47 Caucasian Divorced	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- Being a single parent
		- Role models to their children
		- Role model and teachers to their children
		- Co-parenting after divorce
		- Shared custody and concerns
	Transitional Experiences	- Experiences of the divorce event
		- Taking on family responsibilities
		- Relocating means starting over
		- Adapting to divorce and moving on
		- No regrets

		- Being stuck
	New lifestyle	- A better lifestyle
		- Being single
		- Dating and re-partnering
		- Perceived judgments, stereotypes
	Social Cultural Perspectives	- Divorce and separation in the family
		- Parental role models in participants' families
	Helpful Resources	- Employment and income
		- The prevailing economic situation
		- Personal characteristics and values
		- Support from family
		- Support from friends and acquaintances
		- Support from ex-spouses
		- Community resources
		- God, faith, spirituality
Virginia, 48 Caucasian Separated	Being a Mother	- Children are everything to their mothers
		- The role of children in their parents' divorce or separation
		- Children were affected by separation
		- Role models and teachers to their children
		- Co-parenting after divorce or separation

	- Shared custody and concerns
Transitional Experiences	- Before marriage
	- Causes of divorce and separation
	- Experiences of the divorce event
	- Financial losses
	- Relocating means starting over
	- Stronger now
	- During marriage and the divorce
	- No regrets
	- Being stuck
New lifestyle	- More freedom
	- Being single
	- Dating and re-partnering
Helpful Resources	- Employment and income
	- Personal characteristics and values
	- Support from family
	- Support from friends and acquaintances
	- Support from ex-partners
	- The role of counseling

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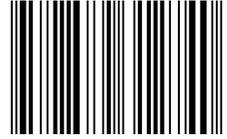
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The Experience of Being a Divorced or Separated Single Mother

A Phenomenological Study

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This book sought a deeper understanding of experiences concerning fifteen divorced and separated single mothers, five African American, five Caucasian and five Latino aged 27–52 years, divorced or separated for one year or more with one or more dependent children below sixteen years old. The qualitative phenomenological approach employed in-depth interviews to collect narratives thus illustrating its usefulness in bringing out rich data. The implications of the findings for the Mental Health Profession, and the Teaching Profession for both the mothers and their children are stated. Detailed descriptions of the lived experiences of divorced and separated women and associated meanings clarify particular aspects in their lives that could affect their wellbeing. Certain aspects of their lives that promote life satisfaction are also highlighted.

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