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**THE LONGING TO BELONG:
AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF SELF-HELP GROUPS FOR SEPARATING AND
DIVORCING PEOPLE**

By

Susan Lynn Bedford

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

September 2001

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**The Longing to Belong: An Ethnography of Self-Help Groups for
Separating and Divorcing People**

submitted by Susan Lynn Bedford, B.A. Hons, M.A.

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Chair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology

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October 29, 2001

Abstract

This research is an ethnography of self-help groups for separating and divorcing people. The aim of the study was to talk to group members about the divorce experience and the support they found in self-help groups.

The primary research objective focused on four main questions: who uses self-help groups, why are they participating in them, what happens inside them and how effective are they? A secondary objective was the exploration of the emotional nature of the divorce experience as described by those who were part of these groups.

Data was collected from November 1998 to February 2000 through participant observation at groups in session, through semi-structured interviews with self-help group members and demographic data from interviewees. These methods gave voice to the experiences of the group participants. To contextualize this information, data from G.S.S. 10 (1995) on "Family and Friends" was used to compare the membership of the self-help group with the general divorced population. The sample was representative on certain variables.

The conclusions of this research are that these groups provide an opportunity to create a personal account of divorce as well as emotional support, instrumental help, a social network and for some a family-like atmosphere. However, some of the outcomes of divorce noted by participants such as loss of faith, financial costs and effects on children are far reaching. A core finding of the research is the negative impact that the divorce process has on individuals and families. Though self-help groups provide beneficial interim support, some factors such as the high personal and financial costs of divorce remain untouched.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to my committee Professor John Cove, Professor Florence Kellner and Professor Craig McKie who contributed much to the writing of this dissertation. Their patience and continuing enthusiasm encouraged me throughout the process.

Thanks are also due to my informants who taught me as well:

‘I have to feel like I belong somewhere’

Female Informant, 39

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Chapter One

Preface

As I did the interviews for this fieldwork, I was struck by the hostility and the suffering that individuals were causing one another daily and sometimes unremittingly over a period of years. I began to think that there may not be a state of war in Canada but that war had been internalized in the family as a way of life. From my journal entry for March 12 1999, I noted:

After attending the first meeting of the support group at St X's, I was left feeling that separation and divorce is like a battle zone. Listening to the stories being told in the group I am struck by the anger that gets played out in relationships. I can't help but wonder whether that same anger could not get played out somewhere else, and ask myself why put the anger there in the most personal of spaces, the intimate relationship? Are there not other spaces where this anger belongs? Some of these separations have contributing factors outside of the relationship itself, such as economic ones.

Whatever the reason divorce seemed like a battleground.

Watching this suffering I began to ask why it was happening, and so in conversation with informants I listened to their versions of this reality. The most controversial version was given to me by an informant who did advocacy work with separating and divorcing women. She told me that in the 70's there had been a choice made by the State not to support families and to allow and even encourage their disintegration. She said that at the time, it had been necessary to encourage the economy and one of the best ways to achieve this was to set the stage for family dissolution.

She said:

There are plenty of people making lots of money out of this. The professionals, the lawyers, the social workers are everywhere. They won't talk to me. Even when I call one of the community centres, they never acknowledge me.

This is the only informant who voiced this view of the divorce situation so although there are some people who feel as if there is a political conspiracy this is not a widely held opinion. Most individuals are more concerned with the immediate personal impact of divorce on their lives.

Bearing these opinions in mind, I began my fieldwork among self-help groups for separating and divorcing people. Gradually over a period of a little over a year, I was able to interview twenty individuals who had been participating in self-help groups for different lengths of time. I was also eventually able to attend some self-help groups as well. This did not happen overnight though.

While doing fieldwork, I fell in love with the courage and the creativity of the human spirit that I found. Even when faced with loneliness and little or no social support, people created a community that they so dearly needed out of their fellow humans around them. It was not a community such as the village, but rather a community of commonality. In this case the common problem just happened to be divorce, which also made people outcasts, so in a way they belonged to one another.

My personal connection to this research is that I also had been divorced and a few years after the divorce, my ex-husband died. As a result of these experiences my family and I became part of a self-help group for bereaved children. Thus my experiences with self-help began. I feel that as a result of these losses I was interested in experiences that I would categorise as the opposite to “falling in love.” While the “falling in love” state precedes marriage, what I saw was the final denouement of this state post-marriage, in groups for separating and divorcing people. I mentioned this in my fieldnotes:

I am hoping I will be able to see the beauty in the agony here and I do see it but in order to do so I have to be very firmly anchored in some sense of life for myself

and why I am doing this. To me this is the opposite process to the "falling in love" event that exists everywhere in our culture. This other event is also a powerful process, the other side of that bright, optimistic one, but it exists alongside it and I wonder why no one sees it as just the other side of the same coin and in a sense, a complementary part of the first side. These two opposites are complementary and I don't think you can agree to have one side and refuse the other.

My thesis then is a study of how this process plays out in peoples' lives as they fall out of love and sever their marriage ties accordingly. This work pays attention to the ramifications of acting on the falling out of love dynamic and ending a relationship and the support that is required as part of this process.

Note:

The use of *italics* denotes direct quotations from interview material while normal text quotations are taken from my fieldnotes and journal. In addition, in Chapter 4 there are *italicized references* to popular literature discovered through field work and enumerated in Appendix 4. Appendix 4 then is a specialized sort of field note. These references are not duplicated in the Bibliography.

Introduction

I think somebody who doesn't go through divorce cannot realise what it is and before I had my judgments on people who were separated that you could fix things up but you can't because it's two people.

I had lots of guilt and like values in the family, you stay married you're grandparents, you have family reunions, parents there and grandchildren and everybody's happy and in real life it's not like that . . . that's the main facts of our world now.

This study focuses on the use of self-help groups by separating and divorcing people. It is a relatively new area, in fact few groups existed in Throughtown until three years ago according to my informants. As well there is only one sociological study of self-help groups (Wuthnow, 1994) and little assessment of services for separated and divorcing people. Divorce is a process that takes several years to traverse (Hetherington, 1999:324) and during those years of change, there are challenges to surmount and a variety of support measures are often required by individuals. These may range from legal advice and mediation to professional counselling. Emery et al (1999) find there are almost no sound studies of these services. Sociology certainly has examined self-help groups in the field of addictions, studying groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) but there are some fundamental differences when comparing addiction and separation and divorce. There are some studies of groups for the widowed population (Silverman, 1986, Van den Hoonard, 2001). Another parallel is with the bereavement literature and the stages of grief: denial, anger, depression and acceptance (Kubler-Ross, 1969), but this model is of limited use for separation and divorce. As a consequence of these factors, this piece of research will be largely exploratory and descriptive. In this case the research has focused on four main

questions: who uses self-help groups as not all who separate or divorce use them despite their growing availability, why are they participating in them, what happens inside self-help groups and finally how effective are they, as shared experience may not be for everyone? These were the primary objectives or questions I pursued during the research but a secondary objective was the exploration of the emotional nature of the divorce experience as described by those who are part of the groups.

Giving voice to respondents and informants, through italicized quotations, will hopefully provide a better sense of how separation and divorce, and participation in self-help groups, has been experienced. This is an ethnography of groups and ethnography in the more modern sense is a piece of writing that we may term a representation. In order to make this representation there were several intersecting literatures that were the necessary framework for this study. They contextualised the problem in its initial stages, advised the research process and continued to inform the process during analysis of the findings. The first of these literatures is on divorce.

Divorce in Canada

The face of the divorce landscape in Canada has been changing and the beginning of this transformation was the increase in the rate of divorce. For example between '81 and '86 the divorced population increased by 38% and by age 54 a third of all adult Canadians will have experienced divorce (Devereaux, 1988). Prior to 1968 it was extremely difficult to obtain a divorce, and the sole grounds were adultery (Vanier, 1994: 19). Later additions to the legal grounds for divorce were marital breakdown and marital offenses such as cruelty. By 1985, marital breakdown became the sole grounds for

divorce, with a separation of not less than a year.

These changes to law were directly related to changes in number of separations and divorces. In 1968 there were 11,000 divorces and by 1990, 78,000 (Vanier, 1994:45). This increase is due not only to growth in the number of married's but also to changes in the Divorce Act, especially in 1986 when "no-fault" divorce was enacted. With a longer life-span the probability of divorce increases in the same way that it does when age at marriage decreases (McKie, Prentice, Reed, 1983:91). The ratio of divorce to marriages serves as another measure. For example, in 1951 there was one divorce for every 24 marriages, and by 1990 one divorce for every 2.4 marriages. As result of this rapid increase in rate we have a change in how we see families. Simply put, before 1968 divorce was socially unacceptable, marriage was forever and in twenty five years this has become increasingly ambiguous.

These kinds of figures allow one to grasp the scale of the changes that are occurring. Concepts of family are under stress due to the sheer numbers of divorces and the short space of time, relatively speaking, over which these changes have taken place, about fifteen years. This is insufficient time for extant cultural notions, expectations of family and what it provides, to develop in accord with the divorce rate and its attendant impact on family. As a result we have some ambiguous attitudes about family and these are reflected in its changing nature and the myths we have about it. To understand divorce it is necessary to think first about what we mean by family.

The stage managing for "family" is so skilful that the discrepancy between the institution and the actuality is often hidden as "myth" (Barthes, 1972). "Myths" are

created out of material that is considered natural and unquestioned. As Barthes (1972:131) has characterised it:

... the naturalization of the concept, which I have just identified as the essential function of myth is here exemplary . . . . In the . . . (mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature. This is why myth is experienced as innocent speech: not because its intentions are hidden . . . but because they are naturalized.

It is these myths that allow the concept of the nuclear family to go unquestioned, to be accepted, and thus become naturalised.

This naturalised concept of family which I term a myth figures centrally in most people's lives. The family provides a haven that is the answer to our sorrows; it is where the problems of the world are not supposed to enter in. The notion of this sphere of intimacy (as defined by Malinowski as one of the three attributes of the universally applicable form of family), is in contradistinction to the public sphere of modern economics and can be deconstructed as a ideological product of industrial capitalism (Collier, Rosaldo, Yanagisako, 1993:11-14). Not only does the nuclear family have to assuage troubles (Adams, 1997:29) but it also has to provide sexual satisfaction. This demand for an erotic and romantic marriage is a twentieth century development. However the new family and the type of marriage that accompany it are, under feminist analysis, revealed as a strange Western creation. This romantic companionate marriage (Barrett and McIntosh, 1990:54) creates loneliness, while providing for individual fulfillment. It may be deconstructed as a medium for both economic and sexual exchange. This combination is an impossible recipe for human relations. Further the combination of sex with economics,

and male dominance and female dependence results in the reproduction of a pattern of sexual inequalities between men and women. As a result of the imbalance within the family, oppressive forms of sexuality result (Barret and McIntosh, 1990:76).

Yet we have a notion of love as the glue in relationships, and it is romantic love that is deemed necessary to make the tie permanent (Parsons, 1951). Relationships provide self-development and a new idea of intimacy. We thus have a family that is influenced by romantic ideals, yet also is the scene of most of the violence and oppression of our society (Ferguson, 1988). We do not consciously perceive the difference between the myth and reality. The romantic love relationship that is central to the marriage arrangement gives us, for example, marriage presented as a consumer choice served up by the media as an impossible combination of “. . . peak sex lasting the course . . . and emotional togetherness as every couple’s right”(Haste:1992:291). Given the power of these myths, no wonder the disillusionment is great.

Traveling the ground through romantic love to marriage, thence to an idealized nuclear family form we arrive with a sharp awakening from the myth of romantic, companionate marriage. Family and kinship systems are disrupted by divorce and I would suggest that what is troubling is that divorce is a challenge to the dominant myth of the idealized nuclear family. Given that this is an all-powerful myth and central to much of how our institutionalised world works, divorce is a threat that destabilises core structures in society (Adams, 1997:27). We have been believing in a modern myth (Barthes, 1972) and the point of awakening is divorce.

With the same clarity that some of the aforementioned feminist theorists approach

love and marriage we should be able to approach divorce (and ultimately the work of this research, the rebuilding post-divorce.) This is the other side of family life that does not receive mythic legitimation, yet it is an equally powerful event in people's lives. For the purposes of my research it is an anthropologist, Bohannan (1968) who provided some of the necessary theoretical approach for my research. Bohannan sees divorce as nested in a social framework. From this basic premise, Bohannan analyses many processes occurring at once rather than sequentially during divorce and organizes these processes non-hierarchically into six "stations" of divorce. Occurring simultaneously there is the emotional divorce, the legal, the economic, the co-parenting, the social and the psychic divorce. The emotional divorce is the process of the marriage dissolving as one or other or both partners reduce their investment in their married way of life. Legal divorce takes place usually with lawyers as the professionals most involved in the divorce process despite the fact that the legal systems of the West were not designed to meet the needs of the family (Bohannan, 1968:42). Then there is the economic divorce: every gain during the marriage is considered a joint gain. For couples with children, the co-parental divorce gains momentum as parents separate yet continue to parent often in a joint custody situation. While dealing with these adjustments, community divorce occurs as the change in social reference occurs. Often individuals have to leave their former community and find support elsewhere with new people. Culturally however, this is where North Americans excel (Bohannan, 1968:52) as this is borne out by the sheer number of self-help groups available (Wuthnow, 1994). As the search for community begins so does the "psychic divorce" in which the individual after years of subsuming self to another, has the

task of separating out from the personality of their former spouse (Guttman, 1993).

Bohannon's theory has two important elements that separates it from other divorce theory. Firstly for Bohannon the stages of the divorce process are not sequential and secondly he casts what can be seen as an individual crisis in the personal sphere into a social context, one that is also specific to a specific culture at a particular point in time.

Although divorce is not new there is one aspect of divorce that concerns us in this study that is a departure. This is the innovative manner in which some people are dealing with this radical change in their family composition, lifestyle and often, standard of living. Although the resources of family and friends are important at this time, self-help groups are a way of supplementing or providing support at a time of a demanding transition for many people. Thus the second literature that I needed to ground my work in was on self-help groups and self-help as a movement.

Self-help

Self-help is part of a new therapeutic rhetoric of self. A popularised version of awareness ideology is that there is a true, real self to be discovered and developed if one can overcome inhibitions (Irvine, 1995). It is these new areas that are drawn into relationships. For Bellah (1985) part of this therapeutic attitude is that the relationship focusses around love that exists between fulfilled selves. These norms apply to both men and women and some of the assumptions that accompany the therapeutic attitude are that both partners can readily leave a relationship (as the necessary resources are always present). The link between this and divorce is that personal fulfilment becomes part of a relationship as opposed to notions of commitment.

As well as work that defines self-help as part of the therapeutic attitude, support groups have been studied as a redefinition of American society, and subsumed under this are self-help groups (Wuthnow, 1994). Wuthnow's study is a national survey of the American public representatively sampled for those who were involved in groups that "provided caring and support" (Wuthnow, 1994:9). Of all the groups listed by Wuthnow just over 25% are defined as self-help (Wuthnow, 1994:65). In the general population, Wuthnow suggests that indicators are that 40% are self-help group members, and of the remaining 60% many have been self-help group members in the past. He also suggests that the membership of the groups is fairly distributed over the various ethnic populations and class groups, while the over 50s are more likely to participate as are those who are better educated (Wuthnow, 1994:48). These groups provide an altogether new kind of community and this meets some specific needs.

Loss of meaning is part of our way of life. Individuals have a drive for meaning and the ultimate danger is to be outside of society where there is meaninglessness (Berger, 1969). Those in self-help may have found previous interpretations inadequate for the rapid change in their lives (eg. shattered kinship relations (Wuthnow, 1994:163) and may need to find a new interpretive scheme more suited to their situation. An interpretive scheme is the protective shield against this fear. Meaning can be found in mediating structures such as support groups and empowerment comes from an identity and a reference group (Bender, 1986).

Gidron and Chesler (1994) theorise self-help groups as being structured in particular ways and having three specific internal processes. Firstly, they develop a culture

which has a direct influence on a member's sense of identity; secondly, they provide social support; and thirdly, they empower their members (Gidron, Chesler, 1994:1). Other theorists have added to this analysis of empowerment. For example, Bender (1986) states, "where before there was meaninglessness . . . now (there is) purpose and direction." Adams (1995), refers to these groups as an appropriate "holding environment" (a safe space similar to that of a mother's nurturing care) (Winnicott, 1972) in which necessary changes can occur.

Beyond a theorisation of how self-help works, there is also the self-help literature and discourse. The origins of much of that literature are to be found in the codependency and addiction field. These books give psychological advice for North Americans on everything from how to control anger, improve marital relationships, use a computer or appreciate opera. Self-help, although it relies extensively on such literature as well as lectures from psycho-therapeutic professionals, nevertheless takes a grass roots approach to solution-finding for its members. There is a definition of problems according to received wisdom which is a product of self-help literature advice that is distilled through the pronouncements of the more senior members.

Beside this newer self-help literature there is also literature on groups that is not as recent. There have been voluntary associations and sodalities that have operated at other times and in other cultures. Reading anthropological literature I saw commonalities between the common interest associations of this literature (Bascom, 1952) and the self-help group of modern Western culture. Both fulfill functions that the kinship group is unable to serve for a variety of reasons. They knit people together for the performance of

a specific purpose at specific point in time up to, and until, the purpose is achieved. At the same time these groups cut across whatever existing kinship ties there may be. The net result is that rather than situations being unresolved and needs going unmet, complex demands are met in the company of others with similar requirements. In support groups for separating and divorcing people, there is a commonality of experience, that of radical, sometimes rapid change of relationships and family structure, and the group exists while this need is fulfilled.

At the same time as this binding together due to common experience happens, self-help has micro level functions as well. These micro dynamics involve the internal workings of the self-help group itself. In an area that is not well theorised, it was necessary to analyse these interactions on the level of individuals. Here insights from symbolic interactionist theorists were the theory of choice where before there had been little previous analysis.

I found Ebaugh's (1988) theory of role-exit and the "ex" role useful. It provided me with a tool for analysing the experience of divorce as described in self-help groups. Ebaugh identifies the types of changes that take place during the divorce process and emphasized the social context and roles that are part of these changes. She analyses the process inherent in leaving any major social role behind whether the role change is from nun to lay person on leaving the convent, (as Ebaugh herself did) or from husband to ex-husband on leaving a wife. Ebaugh uses Goffman (1969) to theorise these types of changes that individuals go through. In this identity-formation process, an audience and a stage where one can act and re-enact oneself, until one gets the performance just right for

the wider world is helpful. One can present an idealized picture of oneself, via the front stage mechanics of the self-help group, and keep the backstage realities of failure and humiliation to oneself. Goffman (1969) has elucidated these concepts of a front stage, where a self is presented for public consumption and a backstage where another self may be hidden.

Subsequent to these adjustments Ebaugh points out that there is something she calls “hangover identity” that an individual consciously or unconsciously maintains after he or she has left a role. Turner (1978:1) described this:

Some roles are put on and taken off like clothing without lasting effects. Other roles are difficult to put aside when a situation is changed and continue to color the way in which many of the individual’s roles are performed.

In other words there are husbands and wives who cannot stop behaving as husbands and wives both to one another and to others. The marital status is associated with the marital role and once the legal status of marriage is gone it may be difficult for certain individuals to drop the associated “married” role. So previous roles, although one may theoretically eschew them, may still be powerful forces in one’s world long past their cessation.

As well as analysis of the micro dynamics of self-help, there is also the necessity of understanding how self-help worked for members new and old. Katz (1986) points out that when donning the helper role there are benefits to the more experienced member as well as to those who he or she supports. For example, the helper is enabled to work out residual difficulties of their own life situation in the process (Katz, 1986). This is an important dynamic in the support situation. Those with similar life experience will be the

ones who can give meaning to others in crisis. While working through their own issues, the more experienced members also help resocialise newcomers within the support group.

Not all literature is uncritical of self-help for example Kaminer (1992). There is also a political problem with self-help. Kaminer (1992) asserts that this is a mass movement that as a whole encourages the surrender of the will in order to reshape the identity. Hillman (1992:5) adds that while you are working on your self (and your particular problem) that sensitivity to social issues tends to recede into the background. A myopic world results. In ways such as this the recovery movement may be interpreted as unaware of social justice (Kaminer, 1992). Taken to an extreme, the social conscience may be eroded so that while one takes complete responsibility for oneself, one takes no responsibility for anyone else or for social issues.

Further there may be issues of medicalisation of the nature of the divorce process occurring when we talk of health and emotional health. In the same way that the biomedical field has a world view attached to it (the human being as a mechanistic entity), and therapies have a world view attached to them, then so too does the world of self-help. Yet it may be an unacknowledged world view. The fact that it is unacknowledged makes it transparent for most and there could be a mismatch between the client, their belief system and the self-help world view. Some theorists go so far as to term this quasi-religion, as Greil (1993) has.

The differences here are between systematic or non-systematic interpretative systems. Therapy is a systematic interpretative system, in that all the pieces are in place to make an integral whole, such as the biomedical paradigm or the psycho-analytic paradigm.

However, self-help is a non-systematic interpretative system in that one assembles the pieces depending on what one comes into contact with, what is available in the group and who is present. There is no definitive system as such. Perhaps self-help is a self-made system, in the sense that one may assemble some pieces and reject others.

Perhaps now the market place offers a variety of ways to see the world that are offered throughout society on a shopping basis (like a consumer). In fact, it seems it is for the consumer to make up their mind about everything health, religion and ultimate truth without guidance, or without a recognised need for guidance. The professionals become less central and there is an openness to interpretation.

Thus using literature that theorised self-help and issues such as medicalisation I chose what I deemed a necessity for this study. As well as the generic self-help literature, it was essential to deal with the literature on the characteristics of AA. Particularly relevant were discussions of AA as the model of all self-help groups. It was necessary to understand AA as the derivative for the structure and discourse of the self-help movement. Though this study is with groups that served quite a different function to AA, still this background was necessary to understand some of the historical processes of self-help's development. I choose relevant theory on self-help and concentrated on process rather than the self-help model per se thus picking up on processual issues.

AA: The Mother of all Self-Help Groups

There is a significant body of research on AA groups which was useful to my exploratory research. It allowed me to understand how AA works (through self inventory and group psychology) (Khantzian and Mack, 1994) and the practise of group

norms (sobriety, accompanied by purpose in life) (Carroll, 1993). According to Khantzian, et al., (1994) AA is a sophisticated form of group psychology. At the AA meetings the members discover that they are not alone in their suffering. The public witnessing, rather like an evangelical profession of faith, goes to the core of individual vulnerabilities. Storytelling -- giving an inventory of character defects is also useful (Khantzian, 1994).

As part of the AA group the individual becomes a part of a flow of relations. A profound resocialization can take place (Haas, 1991). The traditional 90 meetings in 90 days can act as an emotionally corrective family experience (Lieb, 1994). Groups also organise themselves in certain ways to provide help such as sponsors. There is the re-socialising of new members by those who are more experienced and who continue to benefit from the process as they work out their own concerns. This resource can replace the psychological resources of alcohol. At a deep level the script of negative behaviour can be retaped (Haas, 1991).

Although it is now the main form of treatment over clinical care (Glaser and Ogburne, 1982), criticisms of the AA model of cure are legion (Peele, 1995:97). For Peele acceptance of the disease theory of alcoholism is core to the resocialization, "The treatment is learning the disease viewpoint" (Peele, 1995:91). That is to say treatment consists of learning that alcoholism is a disease, not a behavioural problem. Acceptance of the disease and public admittance is required as part of the "conversion" history. If not the individual is deemed in denial. The concept of denial is used to maintain conformity to the disease theory, and of course some do not conform.

Though AA is the derivative for the self-help movement, none the less there have been changes to the form. For example, voluntary participation is key to self-help's success. When attending freely there is motivation to help others and participate in the development of a common meaning. When members have been required to attend (for example by a court order), then the literature suggests that such participants may not contribute in the same manner as other freely-participating members. Individuals attending under duress, may not want to contribute to problem-solving or may be concerned with other agendas that do not contribute to group work. This has developed into a problem for AA groups who occasionally have had to go underground in order to form an AA group of which the court system is unaware (Borkman, 1999).

Conclusion

These literatures, divorce, self-help and AA allowed me to proceed to the task of fieldwork informed about the divorce process for individuals and families, along with an understanding of the services of the self-help movement and its archetypical model in AA. From looking at the literature my four questions and my secondary objectives were contextualised. I saw AA as the prototype from which the structure of the self-help groups for separated and divorced people was derived. While AA had been around since the 50's, self-help groups were a relatively new occurrence and answered needs at a time when family and community was in the process of being transformed. In the following chapter I will discuss the use of the qualitative and quantitative methods that were necessary to do this fieldwork with the groups. A description of the needs of the clientele for self-help groups is provided in Chapter III in which there is a discussion of causes and

effects of the divorce process. By talking to those who participated in such groups I was able to reflect on their nature and the results of this analysis of self-help groups are discussed in Chapter IV. The corresponding benefits of participation in the groups and the ways in which self-help groups answer requirements during divorce and separation are dealt with in Chapter V. In chapter VI I draw conclusions about self-help approaches at the micro level and the implications for relationships.

Chapter Two

Going There and Back Again

From fieldnotes:

As I get closer to these people (those who are separated and divorced) I feel like I am entering a dark zone where most refuse to go.

I get into the fieldwork more and more, and I feel as if I am gently lowering myself off a precipice backwards. Backwards, because I cannot see where I am going and off a precipice because I sense this depth beneath me that is just waiting for me to fall into once I relax and let go.

A few days later I had a nightmare. I do not usually have nightmares . . .

Having outlined my four research questions and my secondary objective in chapter I, in this chapter I will deal with the data that I needed, where they came from and how I went about obtaining them. At the same time I will deal with the problems that emerged in the process of collection, some of which are hinted at in the above quotes taken from the journal that I kept during fieldwork. The description of the research process that follows is drawn from both my journal and fieldnotes, written from November 1998 until February 2000. The results of the data collection will be provided in Chapters III to VI, while here I will discuss methodology including issues such as representativeness and representation. From here I will move on to describe my entry to and exit from the field followed by a discussion of my use of participation observation and interview methods.

Representativeness

The Use of Quantitative Methods

My data are derived from two sources: quantitative data from Statistics Canada as well as qualitative and quantitative data from my interviews. I was interested in who joins

self-help and thus I compared the sample of people I found in such groups with separating and divorcing people from the General Social Survey (G.S.S.) cycle 10 on “Family and Friends”(1995). This is a government funded collection aimed at supplying data on social change pertinent to policy formulation. This particular database was collected from January to December 1995 and provides information on marital history and issues relevant to the family such as joint custody, child leaving, and common-law arrangements.

At the same time, the instrument I developed to make my comparison with the G.S.S. data was a questionnaire with which I collected demographic information on my informants in the self-help groups (see Appendix 3). The data requested were variables such as age, religion, marital status, number of children and socio-economic status. I wanted to compare these to the similar variables I had selected from G.S.S.10 (1995). I hoped in this way to address to some extent the question of how my sample from the self-help groups matched or did not match the general population of separated and divorced people. As well as providing a comparison between the G.S.S. and the self-helpers, the collection of demographic data on group members provided information to situate the ethnographic work. The interviews however that provided my quantitative data were not randomly selected but rather formed an opportunity sample.

In order to make some assessment of how this particular group of separating and divorcing individuals compares with a representatively sampled separated and divorced population I found it useful to analyse data from Cycle 10 of the G.S.S. (1995). (Please refer to Appendix 5 to see these and the following results in a table.) For example, from Cycle 10 of the G.S.S. (1995) I found that the gender of separated and divorced people is

58% female and 42% male, whereas of my twenty interviewees, fourteen were female (70%) and six were male (30%), thus the group was over sampled for women, with more than twice as many women interviewed in the study as men. There were no under-thirties and the bulk of the interviewees were in the forty to forty nine years old age range: five (25%) are in the thirty to thirty-nine year old category, eight (40%) in the forty to forty-nine year old category, four (20%) in the fifty to fifty-nine year old category and three (15%) over sixty. There is a reasonable match with the G.S.S. for age in that the bulk (75%) of the separating and divorcing population in the G.S.S. is between thirty and forty nine. The remaining 25% are the under 30's (17%) and over 49 (8%).

Most of the sample were married but separated, that is to say eleven cases, while five were divorced. Three were living common law and one was still legally married. All but one were of Western European ethnic origins, of which the largest ethnic group was French, (eight cases)(40%), Scots, (three)(15%), English, (four)(20%), Irish, (two)(10%) and one (5%) each for German, Norwegian and Polish. Although this was the ethnic group of the informant's ancestors most informants were in fact Canadian born. No comparison for ethnicity can be made with the G.S.S., as data on ethnicity were not collected in the most recent cycle available. The religious background was predominantly Catholic (nine)(45%), Protestant (eight)(40%) with only three (15%) with no religion. There is a match between the interview sample and the G.S.S. with regards to religious background. The G.S.S. has a similar proportion of Roman Catholic (42%), to Protestant (35%) and No Religion (19%).

Eight respondents (40%) had two children, five (25%) had three children and three

(15%) had four children. Two respondents (10%) had an only child and two respondents (10%) had no children. A total of forty two children are indirectly part of this sample. They were, for the most part, adult children, twenty three being over eighteen. Of the minor children, there were twelve children aged between twelve to seventeen, five children aged seven to eleven and only two under seven. The number of children per interviewee is comparable with that in the G.S.S. G.S.S. respondents have two or three children (51%) while 15% have one child and 14% have no children, a roughly similar picture to my group of interviewees. I cannot match the age range of the children in my sample with the G.S.S. sample as this information is not available as part of the G.S.S. collection of data.

Of the interviewee sample (nine cases)(45%) had a B.A. level of education or above. Five respondents (10%) had some post secondary and six individuals (30%) had secondary or lower levels of education. The education level of my group is not matched with the education levels in the separating and divorcing population of the G.S.S. Of the G.S.S. respondents only a small proportion had a B.A. or above (15%), the majority have some post secondary education, 49%, and 35% have secondary education or less. Nearly half of my sample have a B.A. or higher degree, compared with the 15% in the G.S.S. The occupations of my sample were primarily in the managerial and professional class, that is to say ten cases (50%), the largest single group. Of the remaining occupational categories, five (25%) were skilled clerical, one (5%) trades or manual work, one (5%) retired and three (15%) unemployed. Half of the interviewees were in the professional or managerial categories whereas only 19% in the G.S.S. were in this category. As a result

the skilled clerical and trades were under represented and my sample is skewed towards the top end of the occupations scale. Throughtown however, has a higher than average education and occupation level.

The income level of the interviewees peaks at two individuals (10%) with over \$80,000 per annum and two (10%) with an income of \$79,999 to \$60,000. There were five cases (25%) with an income of \$59,999 to \$40,000, eight cases (40%) with an income of \$39,999 to \$20,000 and three cases (15%) with an income under \$20,000. Despite the non-representativeness of the interviewees with respect to education and occupation, their income levels were somewhat similar to the respondents in the G.S.S. The interviewees were slightly better off: only 6% of the G.S.S. respondents are in the top bracket, of over \$60,000, which is where four of the interviewees are. Eight of the twenty are in the \$39,999 to \$20,000 which is where 35% of the G.S.S. respondents are. However, a full 40% of the G.S.S. respondents have an income under \$20,000 while only three interviewees are in that income bracket. Thus my sample is a match for middle income range, but has too many interviewees at the top end of the scale and too few at the bottom end of the scale.

My small group of interviewees to some extent matches the G.S.S. population of separating and divorcing individuals with respect to age, religion and number of children and income. In comparison to the G.S.S. profile of the separating and divorcing Canadian population my interviewees are better educated, with higher status occupations and somewhat higher levels of income. There may be reasons for a lack of match. For example, having attended university individuals may in some ways be more accustomed to

speaking about problems and attending courses, whereas working class individuals are less likely to go to groups. The self-helpers may be untypical of the divorcing population at large, by virtue of the fact that they themselves have chosen the self-help route and have taken the trouble to find these groups. Other factors that may be highly relevant are not comparable, such as ethnicity and age of children as these variables are not present in the G.S.S. My study does not compare with the G.S.S. with respect to class, occupation and education (probably because Throughtown does not) and of course there is the under representation of men.

There were problems of representativeness of gender in that as a female researcher access to male informants was in some ways restricted. The gender and size of groups also made a difference to my collecting information. However, from Wuthnow's study of self-help groups (1994:47) we know women are somewhat more likely to be involved in groups than men, (44% compared to 36%). Further, amongst Wuthnow's informants women were attracted to groups for emotional support, while men were drawn to groups that provided instrumental help of some kind (Wuthnow, 1994:178). For myself, I found that some of the larger groups that I contacted had both genders, but others were female only groups. The largest group which had both genders was uncooperative at the outset, though I was allowed to attend public meetings. Meanwhile, the groups for women were welcoming and helpful. Thus I met more women than men, and those I did meet were willing to speak to me. It was harder to meet men both in the larger public meetings and the smaller group meetings. Men did not refer me to other men that they knew attended self-help groups as often as women did. All of which accounts for the weighting of the

interviewees towards female informants. As there were more women in groups than men, my sample is appropriate to some extent in that there is a greater proportional representation of women than men in groups.

The setting for the study was Throughtown: a city of nearly a million inhabitants including suburbs. Compared to the rest of Canada, Throughtown is relatively affluent, overly populated with professionals with a reasonably high level of education in the general populace; for example, there are more Phd's in this community than the rest of Canada. The ethnicity of the city though diversifying of late is predominantly French and English and both languages are spoken throughout the city.

Sampling

While looking for informants, I had to search many self-help groups for separating and divorcing people. One of the unintended effects of this was to find a wide variety of groups, workshops, group seminars, women's groups, anglophone groups and one francophone group. In the end I was able to draw informants from a mixture of groups and the research sample was more broadly based as a result. With informants drawn from more than one group I avoided sampling a narrow section of people who possibly would have subscribed to one particular world view.

There was difficulty in arriving at the twenty interviews in that people were hard to reach and were sometimes reluctant to meet with me to talk about their divorce process. Often I was unable to contact individuals when it came to making appointments for interviews. These people did not overtly refuse. I would meet them through a group, collect their telephone number or arrange a meeting. When I called, they did not return

my calls or meetings were cancelled by telephone message. Thus I knew very little about them. I rarely found people at home when I did call, and I usually eventually ceased my attempts to reach them. These people may have needed to have defensive behaviours in place in order to secure their privacy post-separation. The screening of calls may have become a necessary barrier in order to create a new social network after dissolving what may well have been an established community.

Representation

With the needs of my project in mind, it seemed that qualitative methods were well suited to research involving the internal, symbolic and emotional aspects of divorce. The validity problems inherent in qualitative methods are those of adequate representation and comparability. One has to ask how representative of others a particular informant is and whether his or her story is in any way comparable to anyone else's story.

At the same time, one must remember an informant may be engaged in an exercise in impression management for their own and the researcher's benefit. Thus qualitative methods may not claim to be more "truthful" but only that they may adequately reflect how informants wished to express themselves. However, in order to deal with the internal reality of divorce and emotions, and to address issues related both to the symbolic area and to the emotional nature of the subject matter, a methodology that is sensitive to the individual nature of each person's experience is required. The voice of each person with all their idiosyncrasies needed to be preserved, while maintaining awareness of the experiences that I as researcher brought to the interview conversation.

It has to be borne in mind that we act as if informants can get the objective truth of

their behaviour and keep the memory of it. Yet simply because it is representation it includes both the event and a retrospective rationalisation of it, in layers. In writing and recording experiences when researching, the researcher does well to remember that she is dealing with representation of experience, filtered through feelings. We are dealing with the nature of the representation that is given to one as well as the researcher's perception of it, not the actual experience.

Though the representation of the experience may be taken to be the experience by the informant, the researcher has no right to change the informant's belief about this. The nature of the individual's dialogue with themselves about all their experiences, may be exceedingly important to the outcome of events as well as their effect on that individual. What one tells oneself about what happens is the basis of emotions, not the actual event (Zastrow, 1988). This "self-talk" may account for positive changes associated with practices such as meditation. If this is the case, it may be important to record in the informant's own words his or her recounting of his or her experiences. It may be their re-creation of their experience that has created a world of meaning for them.

Paying attention to an informant's ordering of experience may be crucial to dealing with the issue of the difference among the experience, the remembrance and the recounting. The ethics of doing research with another individual becomes an issue in that the researcher not only has the power and authority to create a voice for the other and speak for him, she may also change the way the individuals view themselves and their experiences.

When dealing with representation, as there are two voices at least within the research process at all times a means to be true to these voices would be the use of the dialogical mode to clearly represent whose voice is stating what, and what influences are prevailing. One needs to represent the voice of the researcher as well as the subject in order to reveal the opacity of one human's experience to another. Also, the organisation of the research involves the personality of the individual researcher and this influences the study throughout (Geertz, 1968). Thus, the "author" has to realise that all he may achieve is "... a morally charged story about that." (Clifford and Marcus, 1986:100). However, I would suggest that a voice may be crafted for the other, through a negotiated dialogue.

What is the difference between the emotion experienced and the emotion expressed and can the researcher access that difference ask Gubrium and Holstein (1997:74)? The concern with the difference between representation and experience of the subject can most simply be resolved with a decision to accept and report what people say. This was the route taken for the classic of family and kinship research by Young and Willmott, *Family and Kinship in East London* (1957). They decided to acknowledge they could only report what families said they were doing but could never report on what they actually did. However, they did not only interview but also used participant observation methods as further verification. Here we have to make a decision to be satisfied with what we collect and while theorising issues of representation, acknowledge in the writing of the research that this is all we are ever going to achieve. In addition, informants will tell the researcher what they think she wants to hear, perhaps particularly so in the rather contentious area of divorce.

While I accepted Young and Wilmott's position (1957), others such as Geertz (1968) and Clifford and Marcus (1986) (above) began to help me nuance my approach. I needed to analyze the representations, and not simply accept them at face value. To do so I turned to Lyman and Scott's theory of accounts, in which they analyse why people construct accounts, in what manner, and the purposes they serve (Lyman and Scott, 1970). By using an understanding of accounts from informants we can deal with these issues of representation: we accept the representation as it is but call it a particular kind of lingual device -- an account, and this deals not with a particular act but the accounting given for it. In this way we can integrate Willmott's decision to accept what is given to the interviewer with issues of representation by calling what is received in an interview an account, and being able to analyse it.

Accounts

Doing research in an area such as self-help groups for divorcing people, and talking to group members one will tend to come across what has been called "the giving of accounts" (Lyman and Scott, 1970:112). An account is a type of language device that both situates the teller and closes the gap between the expected action and the actual action. Accounts are used when actions fall outside of the routine range of what is experienced. What is achieved through the giving of an account is that an individual takes on the action but not necessarily responsibility for it.

In sociological literature there are examples of accounts that are justifications for behaviour when one is challenged by another person or group. From Mills (1963) we have the notion of a vocabulary of motives that may be provided for use. This is not an

analysis of behaviour but rather as Mills says “the lingual mechanisms” that accompany it. These are not lies but rather the right words to express a motive. They need to be created as others need to agree with one’s actions (Mills, 1963:443). These various kinds of accounts have in common the necessity of avoiding stigma.

The outcome of an account is that it may or may not be accepted by hearers and this will depend in part on the discursive norms of the group. This is coupled with a kind of secondary socialisation in situations such as small groups, a socialization that people receive through group interaction, the result of which is that they broadly understand the norms of the group (Kilborne, Richardson, 1988). With the support of others in the same situation who must form similar accounts, the individual can construct a personalised account that traces events yet the person retells it so that their part in events does not seem unfortunate, (and in this case a marriage breakdown for example can be recast as not a failure but rather as a beginning.)

If heard and accepted an account allows harmony in social relations to be restored. However, this acceptance depends on the background expectations of the hearers. This varies from place to place, from social setting to social setting. Hopefully, the teller will learn to anticipate the accepted expectations of his constituency. (Lyman and Scott, 1970:125). In the case of self-help groups for separating and divorcing people, the account has a very good chance of acceptance in this particular constituency, as the background expectations of those listening are similar to that of the teller (i.e., they are also divorced or at least separated). The sum total of what is being negotiated is “acceptable utterances” (Lyman and Scott, 1970:141). The background expectancies are

crucial to which utterance is allowed and which disallowed. By frequent interaction at regular meetings and listening to suitable utterances a speech community is built based on shared language, cues and styles of utterance. Once established this community allows the individual to develop their account over time.

During fieldwork I kept track of these accounts in the field but of necessity an account is a changing interpretation that is developed over time and particularly so in the self-help group. The first task however is to hear initial accounts and then follow them as they are developed in their speech community. This means that entry to and participant observation in groups is a first step to hearing individuals' accounts. Tracking the initial account would follow as time went by. However, it was first of all necessary to gain access to the aforementioned groups.

ENTRY TO AND EXIT FROM THE FIELD

Entry to the Field

I would not want it thought that I entered this enterprise believing the project to be seamless and without hindrances. First there was entry to the field. I had assumed that the key informant I had located who was an organiser of a large self-help group for both men and women was still willing to help with this piece of research. She had been my point of entry to her "buddy" group, or small support group. However, although she was willing to help with this piece of research, she was no longer part of the group and so I had to find entry without her support from within the group. I did eventually gain entry to the field and fieldwork began in November 1998 when I telephoned KJ, her former self-help group which functions out of a community centre in an affluent suburb of Throughtown. I

had decided to attend their monthly meeting and seminar which was open to the public.

When I arrived, it was with some trepidation because I did not know how this group would respond to me and to the suggestion of being studied. All I knew was that my calls had not been returned by the organiser since the summer and it was now November. So I felt a little hesitant. At this first meeting I listened to the speaker and stayed behind in order to introduce myself. I approached the facilitator and after talking for a while, I left her my phone number and she promised she would talk to the other organisers. In our conversation, we agreed that a new “buddy group” would probably not be the appropriate place for me to start research as these people were too hurt. I suggested a group that was further along in the process might be more suitable and there was some agreement to that. However, from my initial contact with this particular group, KJ, there was no response, no phone call, and no fax.

My initial foray into the world of self-help at KJ was unsuccessful and I realized the organization had efficient gatekeepers. Gatekeepers were part of the field experience for me and were there at the initial stage of the research. Groups such as KJ were run by members who ensured that those who joined would be comfortable in the group. This was sometimes achieved by keeping the gender component balanced and disallowing entry to the groups for those who were temporally speaking too far removed from their divorce experience. It was recognised that there was a need for the company of those in a similar situation. Thus an outsider was not particularly welcome and in some cases was actively discouraged.

As I continued my work I heard about another group, in Outatown that met on

Friday nights that I could gain entry to, through invitation from one of the organisers. However, it was a two hour drive out of town in a rural area. At this time I could have chosen to make comparisons between the divorce experience in rural and urban areas however due to constraints with travel and accommodation this plan never materialised. However, I knew that if I wanted to compare the experiences of city people to those in a rural area at least I was aware of the existence of such a group.

While I made up my mind to find other groups I did return to KJ. Again I went and listened to the monthly speaker, but this time after the seminar I went to the pub to chat. However, after sitting through elbow touching in the bar from a male single after the meeting, I left thinking maybe the singles scene was not the right place for me and began to question how I had become involved in this in the first place. I was discouraged and wondered how I was going to continue doing the research if I could not sit it out in the bar with the others.

I did return again a few months later, in the hope of finding informants. This time I did make contacts and collected numbers but none of them returned my calls. So, once again, although there was a lot of promise at KJ in terms of potential informants and certainly enough people of both gender, I never actually contacted and interviewed anyone who was a current member of this group.

However, I did interview one person who was a former member of KJ. This was my key informant who I had met a year before I began the work in the field. She had given me so much information at the outset that I had determined to focus my interests around her support group and its activities. She had been very supportive and enthusiastic

at this time. When I had actually begun fieldwork I called her and made an appointment for an interview. We agreed to meet at a coffee shop in a local bookstore. This interview was long and intense and the conversation that I taped as a result was about 45 minutes in length. It was really in answer to the question “How has your family changed over the years?” It took a lot of talking to answer this as she needed to tell me the story of her life, and how her family had changed. There were many themes that came out of that first talk and I asked her if I could interview her again and focus what we had talked about to bring out material that I wanted. She agreed and we met again two months later to continue.

Around this time, I was told of a workshop that was being organised for separating and divorcing people. This was not a support group but rather a series of information seminars. It was organised by a group of volunteers from a coalition of churches. The organisers had heard that I was doing research on divorce and wanted me to come and give a public talk on the social effects of divorce. This was a development I had not anticipated. I had thought I would come in and sit in on the public seminars. I had not foreseen that my active participation in either a workshop or a group might be seen as useful. However I was considered helpful and thus I was invited to be a guest speaker on two nights to provide “expert” advice.

The workshop itself ran for five public sessions on aspects of the separation and divorce experience. I attended these and found informants there that had used self-help groups. Eventually the formal workshop series was over and a list of those interested in forming a support group was made from those who had attended the seminars. As this was the inception of a small group, the members agreed to me joining. They had known

me as a researcher for the five sessions of the workshop and the organisers had also seen me present since the beginning and wanted me to be part of the sessions. So on invitation, I began to attend weekly meetings of this small group.

At the same time I continued to contact other groups for separating and divorcing people. I phoned and managed to talk to the organiser of a support group for separating and divorcing women. I had heard this self-help group mentioned in the welcome address on the first night that I attended the KJ group. I had made a mental note of the name of the group at the time. I thus made contact with the facilitator who had run the organization for the last three years. In that time the organisation had helped over two thousand women with advice on legal, financial and emotional problems associated with separation and divorce. In our first phone call, she invited me to a public meeting on money management for women. This was in January, 1999. I asked to be able to speak to her about the group, to which she agreed. She also said she would help me find some informants and so from this contact I began to attend a series of women's public seminars.

From my contact with this women's group, I was subsequently introduced to another facilitator, who lead several francophone women's groups. I phoned her and met her in her office in Nexttown. This meeting went well and she agreed to let me attend the group that she was currently running in a suburb of Throughtown. Through this group I met many women who later became informants. She introduced me to these women and encouraged them to participate in my research. I attended her meetings weekly, went to the bar afterwards with members and collected phone numbers of possible informants. I continued to attend this and a variety of other meetings at this time, collecting interviews

as I went.

Exiting

Having gained access, there were then problems with being a researcher who needed to exit the field. I had become part of people's lives while I was collecting their "stories." It was odd to be both a part and not a part. I wondered how to disentangle myself from the groups now that I wanted to wind things up and go away and write. I was still interested in the people I had met and how their lives would turn out. I knew enough about the individuals in the groups to know I wanted to help them. I was in the situation of a researcher turning into advocate. I had begun to shift from purely listening to stories to being drawn into action. As a result, advocacy became part of the role I wanted to play, but at the same time it seemed there was little to be done to help, unlike others before me (Stack, 1974:x). However, I consoled myself with the thought that the least I could do was bring a commitment to writing down all that I heard and had seen.

At this point, I was ready to quit, close to saturation from being in groups, when I was asked by a support group's organiser to be part of a new group. For me this was a complete turn around from my starting point with the research. My presence was now requested at a group because of who and what I was: a divorcee and a researcher. I accepted thankfully and attended, ready for more stories.

I was invited to be part of this group after several months in the field, attending public functions. Entry was allowed once I was well known to organisers personally and it was recognised that I was a useful person with some professional knowledge about divorce with access to resources (such as research on particular topics of political interest

to one organiser of groups). So my eventual admission came as trust was established, and more importantly I think, as a kind of reciprocity was established.

In the end I had learned from the interviews and from participant observation, sometimes learning more than I cared to know about men and women and the relationships between them. Through my choice of methods, I was able to collect information on marriage, marital dissolution and its effects while I was sitting in groups that seemed to help people through this process. I also gained information on who uses self-help and what the self-help process is. Of course the ambiance of the interviews, those that I spoke to and even the groups I sat in were influenced from beginning to end by who I was, where I was situated and all of my own past experiences with marriage and partners, children and step-children. It is to a discussion of my choice of methods and the resulting research plan including ethical concerns that I now turn.

PARTICIPATION OBSERVATION AND INTERVIEWING

Participant observation and interviewing were necessary to obtain certain kinds of information over and above demographic data. Participant observation was particularly valuable in order to see how groups actually operate. I would argue it is the single best data collection tool for this kind of exploratory research. This is for a number of reasons: it is flexible, and one is able to actually take part in and record what is happening.

From participant observation of the day's or night's activities in the field usually in a group, I wrote fieldnotes, often the morning after the night before. I spent sixteen months in the field, attending meetings at least once a week and sometimes two or three times a week. Thus over the period of fieldwork I sat in groups on average for over a

hundred and twenty visits. It is from this regular weekly activity that much of my data is derived. As mentioned above, in order to pay attention to the emotional side of the activities these fieldnotes were introspective (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997:9) and in order to deal with my own reactions to visits I kept a journal of my own experiences.

In the process of doing ethnographic work and semi-structured interviews, one allows informants to talk about what they want to, though at all times one does want to collect information on certain topics. I had developed a list of questions to guide these conversations (Appendix 2). In chapter one I described the areas I had intended to probe, however what is particularly important about the method of participant observation is the richness of the data that the method yields beyond original requirements. A great deal more data were collected than was intended from the initial questions. In my case, aside from data on who joins self-help and why, what benefits they gain, and the emotional aspects of divorce, I also collected data on topics as varied as the effects of divorce on children, step-families and custody disputes. These data themes of course were not part of the initial research questions. The method provided this richness, fleshing out the depth of the topics by dealing with the emotional sphere.

One aspect of collecting emotional material is that the ongoing tragedies in people's lives affected me as I did the work: it is part of the method and this is how I learned about people's experience with separation and divorce. In the resulting semi-structured interviews, I allowed the feeling side of the topic to develop if the informant brought this up, while bearing in mind the nature of the account given. The topics that I explored with informants in interviews had a substantial feeling component to them, such

as the process of divorce and the types of support that were found in the self-help group. In these ways the material was sensitive and related to this were privacy issues.

The semi-structured interviews are related to the fieldnotes in that the interviews flesh out in informants' words the experiences that I had heard about in groups first or second hand. In interviews it was often necessary for informants to talk about their marriage before they could talk about separation. As well, during interviews, I asked informants to think about people they knew who were likewise separated or divorced and yet did not join a self-help group. I asked them to think about themselves in comparison to these individuals. Their answers provided me with emic data, as they recounted their experiences to me.

Sometimes it took only half an hour to go through my questions, sometimes several hours. It depended on how much time the individual needed to take to answer the questions. For some a simple one sentence answer to a question would suffice, while for others it could take hours of recounting past history. Only on one occasion did I do a follow up interview and, as explained above, that was for the purpose of finishing what I had already begun.

I organised appointments for interviews, sometimes setting up times on site, but usually phoning later once I had a prospective informant to interview, in order to find a time and location that suited them. Often I got no further than this stage. However, when I did make appointments for interviews I would ask interviewees where they would like to be interviewed and some chose public spaces, such as bookstores, or coffee shops, or sometimes an interviewee would suggest that I come to their house. I would set up my

tape machine and we went about the business of talking about the private realm often in a public space. Then as a means of following up with informants after the interview, I would phone a few days later to thank them for their time and trouble in participating in the research. At this point we often chatted very generally.

Having tape-recorded the interviews I later transcribed them. The gap between recording and transcription was sometimes a week and in some cases was several months. I allowed themes to emerge from the interview material as I transcribed them. Thus the data in the original form shaped my interpretation. This work was particularly intense, in that as I listened to the material I would note down the issues that would appear and reappear, which could be practical issues such as money, or emotional issues or how to cope.

What I did with participant observation was informed by a body of literature which suggested how I might best go about doing this research. In addition to the standard texts on qualitative research methods such as Gubrium and Holstein (1997), Spradley (1979, 1980), and Denzin and Lincoln (1994), I was drawn to studies of kinship, a field in which these particular sorts of methods had been employed. I did so because they were relevant to the work that I was to do with separating and divorcing families in a self-help milieu. These studies informed my thinking about how best to interview and do fieldwork with self-help groups. Of the many methods used in the study of kinship, the following studies particularly informed my thinking about how best to proceed.

In a critique of kinship research, Morrissey (1991) argues that quantitative methods are inadequate for tracing kinship. She suggests a case-based approach for

kinship research although she admits that this is labour intensive. These are the methods used by Stacey (1990) and Stack (1974), both of whom discovered overlapping kinship networks through the use of qualitative methods. However Morrissey goes one step further. In Morrissey's view, Stack and Stacey's use of methods is encouraging but not necessarily sufficient to reveal the dynamics of kinship. She argues that in-depth interviews such as Stacey's which took place over two years are insufficient to discover the working of relationships, and instead recommends ethnographic work as the best tool for researching kinship relations. She argues for the return to the field traditionally undertaken by anthropologists so that changes over time in kinship can be better understood. Weston (1991) is another example of the use of such ethnographic research methods, in this case with research on gay/lesbian relations in Los Angeles. It is these qualitative methods that give insights into the complex nature of the emotional and symbolic realm of relationships.

Gubrium's (1992) work on families in distress, a study of professionally led support groups in two therapeutic institutions, used methods that also informed my approach to research. Gubrium, through participant observation, was able to find the operating model of each institution and further he found that in each situation a radically different approach was used. Gubrium spent time with the staff in the facility, and his resulting fieldnotes taken during and after observation form the main body of his data. Group counselling and conversations were reconstructed through note taking although videotapes and documents also formed part of the data. However, he did not include either structured or semi-structured interviews as part of his methods.

Relying on such studies I was able to analyze the types of methods available as I approached my own fieldwork. To do in-depth work, a stay in the field seemed necessary and to capture the nature of relationships the time-consuming taking of fieldnotes seemed to be an essential component of data collection. For Gubrium (1992) and Morrissey (1991) this was the primary method. In addition however it seemed to me, semi-structured interviews were necessary to capture individual experience, with the researcher choosing what was relevant from the material collected (Young and Willmott, 1955).

Advised by this literature on research methods in the areas of family, kinship and support groups, I was able to contact groups in the Throughtown area. Although I approached many people over a period of a year I interviewed exactly twenty people, six men and fourteen women, all adults, many of whom had children. They were all separated or divorced and were using or had used self-help groups for support throughout their experience.

My research focus was those groups run by members only, as opposed to those run by professionals such as social workers or counsellors. One of my sources for self-help groups was a large group which ran quite a few smaller “buddy” support groups for members. My longest attendance at any one group was over a period of sixteen months and that finally ceased when attendance by group members began to dwindle to zero.

The groups all felt their role was to offer activities as well as support. As a result, I was involved in attending a variety of events. I also looked for informants at these events. I did find some informants through introductions and chats over coffee. I met with many people casually, for example in the bar after group seminars and at coffee time

between speakers at workshop evenings.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Across the spectrum there are ethical issues such as confidentiality that one can anticipate before one begins fieldwork but there are other issues that emerge as one does the fieldwork that one cannot anticipate. Situations such as informants who are awaiting trial are the kind of eventuality that one can only deal with as it arises. With regard to the ethics of the research that I could anticipate I created an informed consent form for all my interviewees in which I assured them of confidentiality and anonymity (see Appendix 1). I was committed to taking all possible precautions to keep the contents of my journal and fieldnotes confidential and identities anonymous. I achieved this by changing people's names and place names in copies of the text. Names of events, illnesses, activities and sometimes identifying characteristics were also altered to obscure identity. Thus some facts had to be blurred in order to maintain informant anonymity.

Before the interview, each informant filled out the consent form. Informants were also told that the interview could stop at any point in time if the informant so desired. The open-ended questions of the interview guide (see Appendix 2) allowed informants to deal with issues they wished to cover in the depth they chose. This was a means of respecting their right to privacy. It also meant that informants could protect their right not to deal with certain emotional topics that they were either unready or unwilling to discuss. They were also notified of the intent of the research and possible outcomes for participants so that they could truly consent to their participation.

Whilst in the field, I made sure participants at workshops or groups knew I was a

researcher. Group leaders were often pleased that I was interested in their work and so introduced me as a researcher to the whole group and then individually to group members. When I was part of a small group I was especially concerned that they were aware of my role, who I was, and the institution that I was part of. This was not insider fieldwork because although I could say I too was divorced, I did not at the time follow the self-help model to companionship and yet was fascinated by it.

I had initially thought of having a focus group to guide the research process both at inception and through the progress of the research however, due to concerns with anonymity, this approach was abandoned. As it happened I did not gain access to the self-help group from which I intended to draw my focus group, so this approach was dropped early on.

An issue that arose during the fieldwork was what to include and what not to include in my recording of the events that were unfolding in front of me. Thus when I attended one small group meeting and heard the story of one man, who was having a “messy” divorce, in his words, in that he would be on trial for wife assault, I knew that anything I wrote about this person could become evidence. I did initially take notes of his role in the group over a period of about a month or so. The group supported him up until his trial date but once his trial was over he dropped out of the group and was not seen again by group members

I had wanted to interview him for the research as he was male and a blue collar worker, both of which would have been very useful for providing some kind of balance to my mainly female, mainly white collar, educated population that I had interviewed so far.

However, he proved to be impossible to contact. In the end, I decided I did not have his permission to write about him. He did not return calls about interviews, so I inferred from this that he would not want to talk in an interview and if this was the case he probably did not want what he had said in group recorded either. Also, the fact that a court case was part of his divorce proceedings and in this case, the custody of two children would be decided, contributed to my feeling that I should delete any mention of him from my dissertation. He now exists only here as a note on ethics. I had felt it would be helpful to know the story of men like him yet he absented himself from the group. I did see him again by chance a year later and we chatted briefly. He seemed well which cheered me considerably. However, as a researcher I regretted the loss of the opportunity to access his experience of the divorce process.

SUBJECTIVITY

As I did the research I had to deal with the rebuffs of those who did not want to talk to me, but more importantly with the effects of collecting these stories which on the whole, were quite dark. I heard stories of suffering in relationships both in groups and in interviews and I noted the feelings in my journal: it was often a moving experience for me. After the initial enthusiasm to do the job began to wane, I then started to note in my journal what it actually felt like to do this kind of work (see quotes at the beginning of this chapter).

Firstly, I became aware that one could reach saturation point very quickly both with the groups and with the people. I found I could not attend support groups two nights in a row because it was in the end more input than I could process. It was not

possible to just turn off when I got home as I had to write up the meeting in fieldnotes and this meant I had to spend yet more time immersed in some already emotionally-laden material. So I learnt that I had to pace myself both with groups and with face to face interviews.

I also became aware of how lonely the work was. Although I was in a group with others, in order to do participant observation I was in a sense alone amongst others. Rather than simply joining in I had to also stay aware and to have my attention focussed on the job at hand at all times. Then when I went home, I had to spend extended periods of time alone writing. The net effect was to drive my attention inwards progressively time after time rather like a meditative process. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) point out that such a method in an emotional area can give rise to anxiety, something I certainly experienced on more than one occasion.

While I was being driven further inside myself, I also began to be acutely aware of the needs of some of the members of the small group. The effects continued and I began to have nightmares, as those who were experienced in fieldwork had told me I could expect. They would nod knowingly when I mentioned it, as if to say, all is going well. In these ways, I began to see the effects of attending two or three support group meetings a week while writing about them. I finished the fieldwork with nearly twenty interviews taped and I began the work of transcribing the interviews. That also proved to be very intense, in that as I transcribed I relived the interviews. The net result was that I felt issues from own past re-emerging. I thus realised that the material was going deep into my psyche.

It took all my time allotted to gain the twenty interviews that I could. I did not have the emotional stamina to stay in the field any longer than fifteen months. When it was over I did not want to return to interview again. My experience of the groups was different however: I had enjoyed them and so it was harder to stop going. They had a way of becoming part of my life and I was becoming accustomed to the company of these people. This produced both benefits and difficulties since I was familiar with how they saw themselves and their experiences, but in order to analyze my data I knew I needed to leave the field and thus that I had to leave my informants and their particular situations behind. Although I have not seen my informants for over a year their accounts have stayed with me and continue to contribute to my life experience.

Chapter Three

The Causes and Effects of Marriage Dissolution: A Sampling of Accounts

It's a couple world out there.

According to the Bible ...God would heal our marriage...For me the ideal of religion didn't meet my faith anymore.

You have to move on. All along you have two choices, you either lie down and die or you get up and start walking again. It's not always easy to start walking. Sometimes you're sorta lying down pulling yourself along by your fingernails.

Having discussed theoretical approaches to self-help groups for divorcing people and the methods for studying them, I will begin to deal with the data that I collected while in the field. In this chapter I will look at the accounts I heard of the causes and effects of divorce. If these stories that I recorded have weight it may be possible to extrapolate this kind of experience to others who are separated or divorced in Canada. There may be others who experience causes of divorce and effects of divorce similar to those that are reported here. From this I will continue with an analysis of the major themes of the data with respect to the experience of divorce. In the following chapters I will deal with the question of the structure and benefits of self-help groups, but here I will deal with the question of who are self-helpers, what they have to say about their causes of divorce and the kinds of problems they see emerging from divorce. These data are drawn directly from my informants' accounts told in interview and during groups as they went about dealing with their own divorce experience.

While reading these stories I find the analysis of anthropologist Margaret Mead

(1968) useful, even though she wrote thirty years ago. She describes a situation which may be akin to the one we are in today. She writes of a culture that operates with a kinship system which is far removed from its ideal. Her fieldwork was with the Mundugumor people of New Guinea who have marriage rules that are difficult to follow but yet are adhered to fondly by all culture members. This clinging to the impossible, contrary to evidence, leads to conflict and the farther the ideal is from reality the more conflicts will arise (Mead, 1970:97). I find Mead's comments with respect to the level of conflict attendant on living an ideal in contradiction to reality helpful to bear in mind while looking at the data from this fieldwork. In these groups we see the day to day experiences of those living with a kinship system whose ideal certainly does not match the reality of daily life.

My sample is a relatively small number of people who agreed to be interviewed by me during or after their separation or divorce. Also part of the sample are individuals that I met during the year in the field with whom I had conversations. However, these conversations did not end in interviews. Looking at the demographic characteristics of the interviewees, I intend to discuss the ways in which these self-helpers may be similar or dissimilar to other separating and divorcing people in Canada.

“Causes” or Accounts of Marriage Dissolution

Having compared my sample to the representatively sampled G.S.S. Cycle 10 (1995) and pointed out the matches and lack of matches in the sample, I will now analyse the results of interviewing twenty individuals who are part of the separating and divorcing population in Throughtown as well as the material gathered from meeting separating and

divorcing people while attending groups. Their stories may be representative of wider Canadian experience with divorce and thus may add illustrations to the macro face of divorce to be found in the G.S.S.

Once we begin to deal with the experience of individuals, we need to think about divorce as a process rather than an end state. This process occurs in a variety of areas of life, social, economic and personal as Bohannan (1968) outlines in his six stations of divorce. However, we may run into difficulties as to where to begin and end this process. We might define the beginning of the divorce process for either one or both parties as the first family crisis that triggers thoughts of divorce (Guttman, 1993) and it ends “when negative feelings related to the failing marriage and the divorce have subsided to the point where they no longer determine behaviour” (Guttman, 1993:55).

During this time change is paramount, mostly without role models or at least ambiguous models to follow. Listening in support groups one hears versions of this divorce process taking shape. Also one hears stories some of which would seem to be causes and some effects of divorce. The content of the data here is derived from what informants said about why they began the process of divorce and what its effects are on them.

There were of course effects on the individual personally which could not be isolated to the realm of relationships but permeated other areas such as faith systems, sense of self, and self-esteem. There were also stories of the effects of divorce on children and the effects in the area of parenting relationships. I did not ask questions about children and parenting as they were not part of my agenda, but once informants were talking about

their marriage, if there were any children, these topics would tend to come to the forefront of the discussion. It was in this way that I managed to collect data on the issues of divorce for children.

“Causes” of Divorce

One could take the stories of the divorce process and organize them into accounts of how the marriages fell apart. As such the casual observer might mistakenly interpret them as being stories of the causes of the marriage break-ups. To the contrary, I would suggest they are rather a telling of a story to reconstruct meaning, a retelling of one of life’s central narratives; a narrative which throughout the divorce process is undergoing profound change. My approach in this section will be to draw from my interview and participant observation data themes which highlight certain “causes” of divorce. So we will begin with the inception of the divorce process with stories of how a marriage begins to dissolve. For some this takes much time and for others it is a much quicker process. For example, on the inception of the divorce process, we hear this from a male informant:

The first separation didn't end the marriage. Then we tried again for another three or four months for the final time. There was a year of sort of confusion.

We see that even the start of the divorce process can take some period of time. In a recent divorce case, it was necessary to decide the date of separation for a couple who had continued intimate relations for three years after the wife moved out of the matrimonial home. In this case, the judge decreed the marriage over when intimacy ceased as opposed to the date the wife left the matrimonial home (Jennison, 2000). One sees from court cases such as these and the following stories that there are periods of great uncertainty at the

point of break-up: of trying and repeatedly failing at the marriage or relationship. There are stories of “causes” or maybe activating factors that took place over many years and developed slowly rather than quickly. From this class of “cause” there is the theme of “growing apart.”

Illustrative of this theme of “growing apart” are two stories from older women who had been married long periods of time, thirty to thirty-five years. The first one is a clear example of this theme:

He never developed . He's still a kid today and he's 61. I changed, I travelled, I took courses, I went to different associations, conventions, took classes . . . as the psychiatrist said, “You lived all your life on your own.”

My second older female informant discusses what happens in more general terms and suggests that there is a problem in society. In her account there are causes to be seen outside the sphere of the marriage. There are no easy answers, no pat formulas for this informant’s account of dissolution, so it was necessary to find an account worthy of telling and to this end the speaker uses material outside of her marriage format:

Well in mid-life crisis it's men and women they are looking for happiness and they're not looking within, they're looking for someone to bring them happiness so if they feel it's not going to happen at home well they see themselves growing older before they . . . find happiness. But if they don't look within they'll never find it. The society now has a lot to do with that because of TV, movies . . . and in this life you're not right if you're not happy. Well, that's not life. You have to roll with the punches.

When this process takes place over time, other aspects of life are drawn in such as one’s understandings of life. From a female informant, I heard this discussion of the spiritual aspects of her life that are changing at this time. She highlights the faith aspects

of the divorce process that occur for her:

I could not let go of my marriage. For me marriage was for life. I . . . remember crying and crying and thinking I want a divorce and then thinking, "No, you're Christian you never divorce."

Accompanying this spiritual confusion there may be guilt and this may be the guilt that accompanies the sense of failure. I heard this from a female informant who talked about her guilt and then went on to describe an example of the intergenerational transmission of divorce as the activating factor:

I feel guilty. I suppose because I told my Mum and Dad, I'm going to have a real marriage, not like yours. They used to fight every Saturday night. Went out all dressed up, as a beautiful couple and every Saturday night come home fighting. I used to say, I'm going to have a good marriage, even as a little girl. I suppose that's why I feel guilty now.

This account corroborates Amato (1996), a study of the intergenerational transmission of divorce, in that Amato's research demonstrated that the risk of divorce is greater when spouses and especially wives have experienced parental divorce.

The themes that appear in the account of a "cause" of marital dissolution for those who divorce after very long marriages may involve material that is rather different than the accounts that appear in mid-life which may involve stories of adultery or changes in sexual orientation. Causes in mid-life tended to fall into some major themes that appeared repeatedly throughout interviews and during group meetings. Loosely I would organize them under the topics of alcohol use, abuse, adultery, growing apart and change in sexual orientation. This is not a hierarchical list but merely as the topics seemed to present themselves. We could start with accounts of 'abuse.' One informant mentioned abuse as an aside and obviously did not want to pursue it. I was told, "*They're the kind of things*

you don't want to talk about. Like my husband was somewhat abusive and I would never tell outside people that.” Child abuse was mentioned and violence:

I put my hand up and I hit her. I didn't see her there. But I hit her. I left the house. My kids were crying.

and from another informant:

He was verbally abusive. He called them (the children) idiots so I would try and protect them. There were times when I couldn't. I have a lot of guilt around how he treated our youngest . . . There was no one I could talk to.

Thus there were accounts with “abuse” as one of their central themes. Shifting away from the theme of abuse we see another major theme which was alcohol use. Here one woman talks about her marriage, about taking responsibility for her marriage and in her account shows how the responsibility may be divided up:

During the bad times, he had an alcohol problem so . . . you can't do anything for them. In the good times when he quit, I thought we were very happy, but probably he was not. Then he started back (drinking) and that was it.

Another woman mentions her husband's drinking habits as part of her account of her marriage:

He would drink, but only at the weekends after I had gone to bed. I would go to bed and then maybe he would stay up and drink and watch TV. I could see that he was drinking. It was not good. It got worse. I moved out of the bedroom. That was a few years ago. It was a bad two years. He got abusive. Not hitting, but emotionally.

Then I heard about drinking from the drinker's perspective. A drinker tells his side of this type of marriage breakdown but this time from his viewpoint. He said:

I start drinking when I met my wife. I don't know for what if it's because I refuse the pressure and the responsibility. I really don't know . . . I start

drinking right there on my honeymoon, why I don't know . . . I was having a vision there, but later that booze she almost killed me.

On reflection, alcohol appears quite prominently in a number of accounts and thus I conclude it is not a minor theme in marriage breakdown but rather a major one. Though it may well be the symptom of other deeper currents in the life, it surfaces as a factor when stories are told of how a marriage dissolves. This theme is reiterated in other sources in the literature that record factors such as substance abuse as related to marital breakdown. In fact in one study, three out of four women cited reasons for divorce involving substance abuse or absence from the home on the part of male partners (Kurz, 1995).

Then there were accounts of marriages that mentioned “adultery,” but there were surprisingly few of them. Perhaps such a story does not make a good account. It may reflect badly on the teller, in that the ego damage may be sufficiently bad that such a public account is not going to be told or such stories are not the stories that will be created for public viewing. Part of the story might involve references to the sexual conduct of the marriage:

As I said there was no intimacy. I would never be vulnerable with him. In the early years of our marriage, he had punched me in the mouth.

The following is a story of adultery that I was told during an interview, and I also heard such stories in groups from time to time:

Then there was this woman . . . . He started inviting (her) . . . over . . . . Every time the phone rang he'd run downstairs. Suddenly things didn't seem to add up.

. . . I ended up confronting him and saying there's somebody else in this marriage. At first he denied it. Then he said yes, I'm no longer committed to this marriage. For me that was the lowest point in my life

that I've ever been at.

This was the most complete story I was told. Usually I did not hear such stories directly during interviews. I did however hear these stories from time to time when I attended support group functions, such as the following, (from fieldnotes):

I turn to my other conversee who is young and blonde and she tells this devastating story of a husband who unbeknownst to her was unfaithful to her with many partners over the last six years. She has been married seven years. She discovers this out when she lands in hospital with pelvic inflammatory disease and she very slowly realizes she has contracted this from her husband. She is only a month into this realization.

Even accusations of adultery as opposed to actual adultery were sometimes followed by violence and threats and this forms the core account in this particular breakdown:

She was saying those things about me and that other girl, and saying that her baby was my baby, which it wasn't. I said, I'm going to go and put the gun to my head so you can have the satisfaction of hearing my gun go off.

In this case the story illustrates how violence can easily become a part of marriage breakdown when emotions are inflamed by adultery or suspicion of adultery. Such stories present a strong narrative in the telling of one's account of the erosion of a marriage. Aside from themes of violence there was the more mundane theme of health and its effects on long term marital arrangements. Health appeared often in the accounts of mid-life spouses. I came to see that this was a major factor in people's marriage histories as is borne out by much larger studies (Booth and Johnson, 1994). The ill health of one or other of the partners seems to bring to a head all the issues of the marriage. The telling of the following story has the theme of health broadly placed in it. The words of this

informant illustrate the effects on marriage of ill health, in this case mental health. She says:

I either go depressed or manic, but I was manic and it was the first time I was manic so I didn't know. You don't feel sick, you don't feel different. You just go. You don't have any control. You don't think of the consequences of anything. Everything to you is so simple. It was like my head was just empty, empty of knowledge, empty of problems. I did not have problems when I was manic. It gave me the courage to leave him because in my mind I wanted to leave him not because I didn't love him or didn't want to stay with him but that was the only way in my mind to get him to stop drinking. And he did stop. When I left he did stop. He didn't have a choice. He had two kids and I was leaving without the kids. He spent three weeks at the Main . . . When he was in the hospital I was at home with the kids manic as hell.

The poor health can be mental or physical and it could be the health of the teller, the spouse or the children of the marriage but none the less, health featured quite prominently in the accounts that were told.

Finally there is the theme “change of sexual orientation” that needs to be elucidated as an account. It is certainly not representative of any pattern that I noticed either in the field or in interviews. It only arose once during the period of the research in my sample, however I mention it here because in the telling of the story the informant illustrates how she did not know of her husband's change of sexual orientation until her daughter told her of it. She mentioned to me that she felt she should have known. She says:

I was married in 1980, separated Feb. 6, 1998 for unknown reasons. Well we just found out a few months ago. Why he left was he is a homosexual and I have three children. One daughter went to live with her father for a year and because of his secrecy and the things happening in his life . . . So things didn't go well so now she's back here.

According to this account the daughter was physically assaulted by her father and left his residence to return to her mother. However as told to me the main theme of this account was one of “change in sexual orientation” though for the teller this was a relatively new account as she had only recently had the information to develop it with.

Finally there is the informant who had the hardest time telling her story. She felt she had no visible reason for divorce and thus did not know how to present her case of separation. The marriage had broken down very gradually and there were no ostensible reasons for it doing so. She had no narrative to tell or reason to give both for herself or for others to hear. However, with time in the self-help group an account was developed to the point that she began to have a version to tell others.

Here we see a variety of accounts for causes of marriage dissolution, such as change of sexual orientation, health issues, growing apart, abuse, alcoholism and adultery. However I would like to suggest that these are constructions of reality and definitely reconstructions of self that are presented at a support group for hearing in a public space. Self-help allows for the developing of an account when there is one lacking and over a period of time provides opportunities where this account can be developed and refined to suit the individual and their life needs at the time. This telling of what happened, consequences and solutions (as they are worked on in day to day or week to week development) is crucial to what self-help provides.

In the case of divorce there is a gap between individual expectations (for example, romantic love, emotional and financial stability as well as commitment to common goals in some marriages) that looms large in comparison with the actual experience of individuals.

At the point of divorce they are no longer part of a nuclear family, their marriage is no longer a life time commitment, and they no longer enjoy love and security. In comparison to these ideals the gap is greatest at the point of divorce and thus the construction of an account is often necessary. These accounts allow the individual to close the gap in the company of similar others (Lyman and Scott, 1970).

EFFECTS OF DIVORCE

Moving ahead from the accounts of a “cause” for separation or divorce we can now look at the accounts as one moves from the inception of separation to its full effects in many areas of life. I have organised the effects of divorce in adults into loss, personal crisis and emotional health. Beyond the personal effects we see results for other family members particularly children. The effects in the personal sphere thus are followed by the theme of the effects on children, including custody issues. This is followed by a discussion of the playing out of the divorce dynamic in the area of finances and the resulting involvement with the legal issues of divorce. The discussion of the results will begin in the area of the effects in the personal sphere.

Loss

The initial effect of separation and divorce that one hears in the stories is a kind of overwhelming loneliness and, one might even say, a kind of longing and this is particularly so for the older women post-divorce. In the case of the following two informants, their change of life is involuntary as their husbands decided to leave them. Here one hears the voice of the older women in the study as one woman close to retirement speaks of her fears:

Well I was afraid of loneliness. This was the worst. What happens for women of my age when they separate. It's all the lost dreams. We worked so hard. We've worked, we've raised our kids for a main goal and this at the very end dissipates.

For these women, the fall-out from divorce is severe. They lose in many ways. Although they do not talk of poverty they recognise that they have lost their dreams that they worked together with a partner over many years and then at the end of the marriage the dream is not fulfilled. Again, another older woman speaks:

After my separation obviously I was really devastated. I didn't have a job or anything. I knew I had to find something to occupy my life now that my children had grown up . . . . It's about twenty one years I spent at home with the kids.

The situation of the older female divorcees is a very specific kind of loss. Weitzman (1985) discusses these older women homemakers who do not see the fulfilment of their trust in the marriage contract. The law changed while they were more than halfway through their life with their spouse: “. . . the courts have changed the rules in the middle of the game -- after she has fulfilled her share of the bargain.”(Weitzman, 1985:xiii). In other words, despite fulfilling their share of a contract, the nature of the obligation changes and these women experience a particular kind of loss.

The older women are very well aware of the nature of their social predicament. They told me they no longer fit in. Their social status is one which is hard to accept for their generation, and for which they have no models. Here one informant talks about what she calls the couple world for a single older woman after her divorce:

I might see the woman once in a while but you won't be seeing the couple, like going out doing things. . . . In that sense it's a couple world out there. To do things with other married people, single people have to find other

single people to do things.

Unfortunately I do not have interviews with older men from long term marriages so I have no versions of their accounts of this process with which to compare the women's accounts. I was made particularly aware however of older women's losses. Their loss of role can be total, particularly if they have little or no participation in the work force up to this point. Also if their children are becoming adult, the loss of marriage may coincide with the loss of the mothering role. At the same time the divorcing woman may be required to re-enter the work force after many year's absence. These role changes may prove to be extremely difficult. I have seen these issues occur at the same time that chronic health problems interfere with the ability to achieve full labour force participation. In other words in some cases the demands of changing roles may be more than an individual is able to meet.

I do see that after long marriages these women must remake themselves and find a new role to play that is in stark contrast to their former role. These are stories of forced role exit (Ebaugh, 1988) and it is occurring at a later stage in life after a role has been played for many years. The involuntary nature of this role exit and the fact that the role has been played for most of the adult life means that it can take many years of rehearsing a new role before a new sense of self and a new role can be taken on. However, it may not be possible to find that new role at all, particularly without good support along the way.

Crisis

For both men and women going through separation and divorce there was a recurring theme of crisis. That crisis can be purely personal -- involving one's sense of

self -- or it could include larger aspects of a sense of self such as a faith or spiritual issue that becomes part of the separation and divorce process. It is intimately tied up with the loss of sense of self and the eventual development of a subsequent sense of identity, changed from what it was. Part of this sense of self may be derived from the family of origin and these issues may come to the fore as part of the divorce process. As one male informant told me, "*When things break apart you can go right down to the ground, questioning the structure, what everything is built upon . . .*" Individuals may be catapulted into a situation where they, as the informant says "*question the structure,*" that is the foundation for their meaning in the world. Part of the process, can be loss of meaning since the former partner may embody meaning for that individual. From Bowlby's work on grief (Bowlby, 1974) we know that the meaning is not necessarily related to how worthy the object of love was. In an analysis of Bowlby's theories on widows and grief one writer tells us:

The depth of commitment to the lost love object is not determined by the inherent worthiness of the object but by the extent to which that object somehow embodies meaning for the griever (Bakker, 1995:201).

When the person voluntarily leaves in the case of divorce, meaning may well go too. In the case of bereavement through death the loss of meaning may not be so great (as there is support and meaning available through religious or spiritual systems for the bereaved). As the marriage goes there may be a loss of sense of self. This was the case for more than one informant. One in particular completely loses her Christian faith as part of the process of her divorce:

Still I was having a hard time letting go of my marriage. My counsellor

said I can't help you with this. You have to let go. They (the support group) all said you have to let this go, but . . . I couldn't let this go, so for me joining the support group I had to turn my back on my faith. I had to say God is not going to ever heal my marriage and it will never be again and I will never be married to this man. I have to get healing and the church cannot give it to me. The church did not offer the teaching that I needed to learn how to be a healthy woman. I left the church at that time. And I joined the support group.

For some many things are lost in the process of divorce, not just a marriage but a whole world as well. For if you lose your faith as part of this, then many of the people who surrounded you while you were married will not continue with you through the rest of your life story.

This account elaborates one of the socialisation effects on children of divorce, as described by Gee (1993: 308):

. . . the low religiosity of persons from homes experiencing parental divorce is due to socialisation effect . . . thus the children of divorce were . . . raised in homes with less religious involvement and commitment and carry this non-involvement into adulthood.

It is of interest to note that children of divorce attend church services less frequently than those from intact families (Gee, 1993:308), which is not surprising in the light of the above informant's experience. It fleshes out the finding in the literature that children of divorce are most likely to state that they have no religion, and this is more so with men than women (Gee, 1993:308). The effects of divorce on the parent's faith system may also be experienced by their children as they grow to adulthood, in an atmosphere of questioning and reappraisal, thus we see a "socialisation effect". There has been a relationship between religiosity and conventionality (or traditional roles) and this may have had a preventative effect on divorce, however it seems that these trends may be changing. The

effect of religiosity may now have a weaker effect on marital stability and the prevention of dissolution than previously (Nakonezny, 1995).

Health

Aside from spiritual crisis I also saw emotional crisis coming to the fore post-divorce. I found issues in my data that I grouped around the theme of health in general that included mental and emotional health. The events of separation and divorce can affect the individual in a variety of ways. One informant speaks of her mental state during the time of separation:

I thought he's going to come to his senses . . . I had to go to the doctors and get anti-depressants. I fasted and prayed and I was running up phone bills of over \$300 a month. By that time he was leaving the house.

This informant did not seem to be atypical in her need for medication and help. It seems that many are quite dysfunctional due to the dynamics of the separation and divorce process particularly as the situation becomes inflamed. This state can last as long as six months or a year. Only in exceptional cases however, does the emotional turmoil continue over longer periods of time, but when it does occur it can sometimes be for many years.

I did hear some people admitting to being dysfunctional. For example, this informant said, *"Like I said for the first five months I was in another world. Unable to function properly."* Another woman mentions, *"Emotionally I was a wreck. Hard to think straight . . . to keep things on an even keel."* And as a result of this kind of effect mentally and emotionally, not surprisingly adults may make poor decisions at this time and engage in actions and behaviours that they regret later. The difficulties are intense with respect to behaviour and decision making because separating adults are going through

states that are often unfamiliar and confusing. We do have a younger male informant speaking of the male perspective at this time, (though the females in the study did not describe such behaviours):

. . . it's not male to talk about your feelings. Males like that who end up with their relationship broken they're going to be out there trying to bag every woman they meet or be kinda isolated.

The firm basis on which to behave and act has been removed. Ebaugh (1988) speaks of this as the emptiness felt when a role is lost and lack of certainty results. In ways such as these the adults during separation and divorce go through stages and states that are unfamiliar to them, losing accustomed status and even world views or religious beliefs at the same time. At best, a kind of overall confusion seems to be characteristic of this phase of the divorce process. Meanwhile, for many adults, there is the added complexity of the other family members, the children, who are themselves affected in many ways by the divorce. They are part of the process as their parents do their best to deal with uncertainties, emotional distress and loss of faith.

From the data it seems that the role of health and particularly various states of ill health have a major effect on a marriage. There are outcomes for family members when subsequent to ill health a marriage fails. If prior to divorce the family is stressed by ill health as work-loads increase and finances decrease, there will be more difficulties particularly financial ones when the family fragments. The literature accords with this view in that there are poor mental health outcomes post-divorce for adults, particularly males (Larson, 1995). Also there is an established relationship between declines in health and subsequent marital satisfaction (Booth and Johnson, 1994:218). Thus these accounts

from informants recorded during fieldwork are in accord with the conclusions of other researchers in this area.

Effects of Marital Dissolution for Children

During fieldwork some of the stories of the effects of divorce that carried the strongest emotional weight were the stories of the effects of divorce on children. These are stories drawn from the accounts that parents gave me. I did not interview children directly, but a considerable number of parents found ways to make their children a part of their accounts, in some cases the major part. Thus I have included these accounts here as part of the effects of divorce as told by parents. From my data I have organised the stories parents told of their children in the following way: there are the effects prior to divorce, the initial impact of divorce, the post-divorce effects including situations involving joint custody and finally the effects of new family forms that children find themselves in subsequent to divorce. Part of the situation in Ontario is that courts favour the joint custody option as the appropriate method for the care of children (Colman, 1998). However no matter in what ways custody is awarded, when taken together, these arrangements amount to a great deal of change for a child or adolescent and thus there is much in the separation and divorce process for a child or adolescent to navigate and internalise.

The first story I will relate was told to me by a mother, a story of her son's experiences with her husband, the boy's stepfather. In her account she tells me:

The whole eight years I spent married to this guy, he picked on my son and yelled at him all the time . . . so he really learned to lie down and do

nothing because he knew nothing he did was right anyway . . . Big issue with home work. That was the biggest thing that his step-father screamed at him about. Lot of residual stuff there, even though we've been gone four years . . . It's subconscious at this point.

She eventually left this relationship for her son's sake, unfortunately after damage had already been done. In this story then, we see the effect of family life and ultimately divorce on schoolwork for a son.

The following story is also about the effects of divorce on a son, told by his mother. The mother left a long term marriage to a husband who was a member of the caring professions who she describes as abusive:

So he (the father) moved out March '93. In the fall my son had major problems at school. He started being suicidal, threatening my other kids. Smashing walls. I didn't know what to do, so I put him in hospital, for seven weeks . . . I had to get him into NA. He said Mum I'm not doing very well. Trying to get into to see a psychiatrist. There's a four months waiting list. My son might not be alive in four months . . .

This suicidal effect on children of this early phase of divorce was not restricted to sons but was experienced by one daughter also. While interviewing another mother, I heard the story of one nine year old daughter who experienced suicidal tendencies as her parents fought a custody battle over her and the other two children of the marriage.

As can be seen from these stories of the initial impact of divorce on young people in a family, the effects may be severe. While attempting to cope with their own mental and emotional confusion throughout the divorce process, the adults, in this case, mothers (all but one of my female informants were mothers) have to deal with their children's stress reactions, which of course may be fed by the confusion in the lives of their parents and by the dynamics of the family both prior to the divorce process and in the subsequent

state of grief or loss post-divorce. However, there are other issues that surface as the family begins to adjust to a permanent situation after marital dissolution.

Post-divorce there are a variety of arrangements that may be put in place to care for the children of the marriage. Just one of these options is joint custody. The children who live in joint custody have to come to terms with the day-to-day reality of both parents' houses and as part of the arrangement they may have equal amounts of time in each house. The following is an example of a post-divorce situation where initially the children lived in a joint custody situation. In this account, the female informant told me:

We decided to switch because we found one week, seven days was not okay, for him (their youngest son, age three) to go seven days without seeing the other parent...It would be very difficult for him. He was in daycare at the time. So we decided to split the week up. Wednesday we'd (mother and new partner) have him, (as well as)Tuesday, Thursdays and then every other weekend. We thought that was better but then there was a lot of confusion because he never knew what day he was at which house.

Whether or not the children live in a joint custody situation, they may then have to adjust to one house or the other and choose between the two life situations. Or following this situation of adjusting to joint custody there may be the demands of adjusting to a subsequent new family structure, whether there is remarriage or the reality of their parents' involvements with adults other than their parents. Often, children resist their parents' new involvements by whatever means they have. One mother spoke of her adolescent daughters reaction to her new relationship:

She tried everything she could to make things bad in our relationship. I was patient with her. I told them (the children) what was going on.

So in this account, while the younger children (aged four and six) accepted the informant's

new partner, her teenage daughter did not. According to the informant, part of this situation was:

She was being told by Daddy "Mum doesn't love you, she only cares about her boyfriend." So I had to always fight the negative messages she was getting. It was about six months I had to wait to get her to turn around.

The partners' negativity towards one another and the uses to which it may be put, are a factor in a child's adjustment to the changes of divorce and the subsequent new family formation. There are a variety of scenarios for children, and they may continue to resist the new developments in their parent's lives.

Listening to these accounts of the effects for children one can see that the new reality of family may work for some children, while not for others, in that some siblings may adjust and some may not. Thus siblings may be split from one another during the divorce process and part of the variation in response are the children's different developmental stages.

If we take to heart these stories from the parents, we need to bear in mind certain theoretical perspectives. One such theoretical approach is the family conflict perspective that holds throughout the studies on children of divorce (Guttman, 1993). Talking to parents about their divorce it seems that the families that do the worst are those that are forced for one reason or another to live through periods of high conflict between the two separated, and subsequently divorced parents. The damage to children, the erosion of parental pride and energy and the drain on family financial resources because of legal battles does immense damage to the family.

Most recently Cherlin (1999), has argued that although divorce does indeed affect children in that not having two parents leads to short and long term problems, he argues that this finding needs to be qualified. Some of the differences found in these children may have occurred anyway, the effect is not solely due to divorce. To state that divorce is the “cause” of certain effects on children is an over-simplification. For some families with problems such as health issues, alcohol problems or abuse issues, married or divorced there would be fall-out for all family members, especially children. However there is one area of influence that one can directly attribute to divorce and that is poverty, not just for ex-wives but for children too and not just initially but continuing post-divorce. The financial cost is tremendous both initially and long-term for most families affected by divorce and one hears a great deal about this in the accounts.

Finances

The effects of divorce are particularly acute in the area of personal finances. Divorce is part of larger social and historical trends. In the same way that the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial manufacturing base was not achieved without some major disruptions of family life, (with women and children transferring their working potential from the home to the factory), the transition from secondary to tertiary economic sectors over the last forty years does not come without impact on the family (Cowan, 1992:30). The main impact in this case has been due to women entering the work force and choosing to reduce their fertility. Related to these major historical changes are changes in family life, such as divorce, and this plays out in the contentious issue of how to divide family finances at the point of divorce and provide support for minor children.

Part of this financial picture post divorce are the problems with assigning support awards, the scale of these awards, and their non-payment. Support issues occur first at the point of separation but continue beyond the initial splitting of the family, for if that family recombines with another then we have what are termed “recombined” or “reordered” families (Cockett, 1994). As a result of recombined structures post-divorce one arrives at complex financial realities including remarriage and blended families and the support awards appropriate for their needs. Day to day realities of running two houses, not one, involves two of all the necessities of life (Bohannon, 1985: 33). Less than adequate levels of support, if they are present when the original family divides, are exacerbated when the remaining fragments of the family (McKie, 1993b) make a new family unit for themselves. The issue with limited resources can be quite simply which children to support. A parent may be forced to choose between biological children elsewhere or stepchildren present in the home (Pask, 1993).

Accompanying this is the significant social problem of the many families that do not receive their court-ordered support, keeping many families in poverty. In Ontario there are 90,000 payers in default (Vanier, 1994). More than half the women who have support orders do not receive the support (Weitzman, 1985:262). and one Alberta study showed that only a third of women received their court-ordered support (Weitzman, 1985:283). Eichler’s comment on this phenomenon is, “Obligations are absolute and rights can be lost” (Eichler, 1997:99). According to other theorists, there needs to be some kind of system whether state or enforced support, where we do not end up with “. . . the least financially able parent bear(ing) the greatest share of the costs of divorce and

the costs of child bearing.” (Pask, 1993:201).

In 1993 16% of all single parent, mother-led families received child or spousal support and the average amount was \$3604 per year (Eichler, 1997). According to my informants, the amount of the support to be paid according to the support guidelines of 1997 is still less than adequate. In effect child support payments for the majority of single parent families are only one piece of the puzzle necessary to eradicate poverty.

Men and women have different perspectives in marriage and this shows when it comes time to calculate child support at separation. Men may consider children as part of the package of negotiables when it comes to working out an agreement post-separation while women may feel that children are outside the sphere of negotiation (Weitzman, 1985:311). A socialisation difference is that women will tend to be concerned about the interpersonal nature of the negotiation while men may, while negotiating, see the economic outlook as being quite distinct from the nature of the relationship (Weitzman, 1985: 316).

Thus one of the major effects of divorce is in the area of finances and nothing seems to ameliorate this impact for families. Some of the variables that are part of the financial picture post-divorce that I saw in case stories are length of marriage, each spouse's career, or lack thereof, assets of the marriage, number, age and gender of offspring, and the state of health of each partner. These variables build a complex picture of factors that resulted in the same effect -- that of divorce giving rise to a variety of negative financial effects both immediately and many years later for family members.

In fieldwork I heard much about the financial effects of divorce in the personal

sphere. To begin with individuals are usually particularly ill prepared for the financial impact of divorce on their lives. In the build-up to the divorce state, the soon to be ex-partners may be acutely unprepared for its unfolding. As I heard on more than one occasion during fieldwork from women, "*He took care of everything*" with reference to her ex-husband and the finances of the home or business. In some cases, these were dual income couples with the husband managing the wife's income as well as his own. I heard this during workshop meetings and during interviews as well. Thus at the point of divorce the wife may not have an adequate understanding of what her personal financial situation is or whether she is entitled to a share of matrimonial assets.

There are cases in my sample where finances were discussed at length. I did not specifically ask about the economic issues of divorce but rather asked about support in more general terms. Both genders are represented in the following stories and all the socio-economic statuses. There is one commonality though (except in one case) and that is a sense of struggle. There were cases such as the mature student mother, the mother of the disabled child, the mother in a court battle over her divorce settlement, the older man, the self-supporting mother, the mother with the mental breakdown, the mother in a new relationship and the male single parent. Out of the twenty interviews these are some of the ones that gave me details of their financial situation in answer to the question, "Who gives you support financial, emotional or otherwise?" Some did not answer at all or avoided this question focussing on emotional outcomes so what you see here is material from those who are both the most open about their financial situation post-separation and divorce as well as those who have the most issues to discuss.

Case 1

The Mature Student Mum

This informant is forty-six and divorced at the time of the interview. Her ethnic origin is English and Scottish, she has no religious affiliation and is the mother of four children aged twenty three, twenty one, seventeen and thirteen. She is highly educated with a Masters degree and her occupation is in the professional category. She currently earns in the category of \$20,000 to \$29,000.

I talked to her about her children and where they lived post-divorce. This is one of the first issues that must result from marital dissolution given that she has four children, two of whom are not yet adult. She had considered renting but found that rents were over a thousand dollars a month. So she used her divorce settlement to buy a small house. She says:

I had debts to pay off. So I bought my house. It's a very small semi-bungalow. The basement is finished. I have three bedrooms upstairs and two in the basement . . . . I thought it would be hard for us to adjust, after a big house, double garage and pool. But we all feel a lot closer. It's like an apartment building. I'm upstairs. When my son is not there, I'm up there on my own. The girls are in the basement.

Although now earning, initially post-divorce her only source of income was welfare:

I was on welfare when I first divorced. He quit his job. He had a job that was \$45,000 a year half non-taxable so it was equivalent to \$60,000 year. So I should have been getting in support well over \$1200 a month. (He) gave me \$400 a month and told me \$100 a month (per child) was more than adequate. He didn't feel he had to do anything. So I lived on welfare and \$400 a month . . . . I went into a debt at that point.

This woman had been a stay-at-home mother for the duration of her marriage, thus when the marriage dissolved she needed to join the labour force. Similar to many women at this

point in the divorce process one of the many problems post-divorce was lack of training and education. She told me:

Basically I had a grade twelve education. I hadn't worked so I said I can go back and hopefully get a degree and we'll have some kind of a future. I did a B.Ed. and an M.Ed. back to back and I got my first job Sept. 98.

This training took five years. From this account I would suggest that this is one of the success stories post-divorce in that this informant was able to retrain to become a professional starting with only a grade twelve education. Thus she re-began her life and gave some support to her children. As she says in her account, *"I'm just starting out."*

Case 2

Mother of the Disabled Child

At the time of the interview this informant is forty-four years old and still legally married but separated. Her ethnic origin is European, she is Protestant and has one child aged nineteen who has cystic fibrosis. She has a university degree and was a teacher, but is no longer working as she is the full time caregiver for her son. Her income is in the lowest category, under \$20,000. As with the previous case housing is one major aspect of finances post-divorce. After a long marriage she had to search for accommodation for herself and her teenage disabled son. She discussed this with her support group (from fieldnotes):

I have problems. We must find somewhere to live by the end of June. I am looking at apartments. Maybe I am too demanding, but it is so hard. We have always been in a house. My son, is mad too. He has always been in this house and now we have to move. I have problems with accessibility.

As well as problems with accessible housing post-divorce, this mother also needed to find

alternate nursing care for her son. While married, the son's extra nursing needs were met under the insurance provisions that were part of her husband's benefit package accompanying his job. Once separated, this benefit ceased. As she was now technically living on welfare and her son's disability pension, the nursing care now was provided through the city of Throughtown. The care was less adequate and the mother had to provide more care than previously. (Her son required full-time care both day and night).

She did eventually find accommodation in a public housing development. But as her group members commented, she is having to adjust to a new, poorer reality in her life. Having found housing, her finances were still in straits. She has problems dealing with the agencies who are set in place to collect support from ex-partners. She said:

They are not active in pursuing him. They are in Toronto. It's a central office for the whole Ontario. It's a terrible system. Its not helping families at all.

Despite her efforts and those of the Family Responsibility Office, it is not possible to trace her husband as he has left his place of employment and is not in contact with her. So although she does not want to accept welfare, she knows that when the money from the sale of the matrimonial home is exhausted that this is where she must turn. She faces the greatest need of all those I spoke to in terms of financial support, accessible housing and nursing support.

Case 3

The Older Male

At the time of the interview, the informant is fifty years old, and his marital status is living common-law. His ethnic origin is Irish and he has no religious affiliation. He has

two children, a boy aged twenty-five and a girl aged twenty-eight. He has an MBA and works in a professional area earning over \$80,000. Quite simply, he says in answer to a question about his needs for support, his account is, "I'm very comfortable financially so I don't get support financially from anybody."

Case 4 **Single Parent Father**

This informant is thirty nine at the time of the interview and divorced. His ethnicity is French and Scottish and he is Protestant. He has four children, three sons age fourteen, twelve and ten and a daughter age nine. He has three years of post secondary education. He is self-employed doing technical work earning between \$40,000 and \$59,000 a year. In answer to questions on support he told me:

I don't get any financial support. I'm basically on my own. There really isn't anyone I can turn to for that. In a dire emergency, I might get a few hundred dollars from my mother but I'd rather not. . . there isn't really so much support.

Then he detailed for me the losses he had sustained from the divorce in damage to his business and loss of property. He lost his home, possessions, property, business and car. He added that due to substance abuse his wife became threatening:

There was extreme psychological trauma for everyone. The children's mother, she's very violent. She had threatened to kill all of us many times.

In this account, the losses he sustained including loss of business that he told me of came to "half a million bucks all told."

On the basis of these cases, in spite of a small sample set, some conclusions can nevertheless be drawn, even if they must remain tentative. Firstly some of the cases fulfill

the stereotypes that are well known in the literature: the male who does well post-divorce and has no dependents, (case#3), and, the younger woman with dependents who does not do well financially post-divorce (case#2). According to Weitzman (1985:xii), women in the U.S. experience a loss of income post-divorce, with those who are young homemakers and older married women experiencing the greatest degree of loss.

Whether male or female once someone chooses (or is forced to choose) the nurturing role then there are prices to pay. The single parent father found he was discriminated against. He was a contract worker in the high tech field and he told me, "*I had a contract cancelled because I was a single parent Dad.*" Prospective employers were concerned that he would be unable to meet deadlines due to the pressures of being a sole support parent for four children. Due to perceptions such as these from my cases it seems that the more burdened with care-giving the less financial support is available to the individual. Certainly it is women who more commonly take the caring role. However, by one mechanism or another, whether lack of opportunity to enter the labour force or by exclusion from contracts that are given at discretion, care-giving tends to have an economic disadvantage accompanying it. This is true of either gender and those with more children and/or disabled children are the worst off, while those with no dependents are the most affluent.

It would seem to me that the effects of the marital dissolution are the most severe when there is a complicating factor that one has to add into the separation and divorce process such as the illness of a child or partner. I would suggest that in such a case there is a compounding of the needs situation, and there is an exhaustion of the infrastructure to

cope with the needs of these individuals as in the case of the mother with the disabled son, who had to search for accessible housing and adequate nursing care for her son, when her husband deserted them post divorce.

As well as labour force participation, and housing, part of the financial picture during separation and post divorce is the attention and resources that have to be directed to legal costs. As property, support costs, sale of the matrimonial home and custody of children have to be settled the legal costs can become sizable and these may become an inevitable part of the financial picture for those who separate and eventually divorce.

Legal Issues

“The child gets put in the middle.”

Aside from the ongoing issues with support, there are simply the costs of divorce itself to be considered. While doing fieldwork I came across a number of stories of these costs. I also saw lawyers and mediators discuss the legal process. *“No one wins in going to court”* is a theme that I heard reiterated throughout the fieldwork from legal professionals, in that they were aware that the legal process was costly and did not give families what they needed. The actual cost of divorce came as a surprise to some. Here are two stories from my research on that topic, firstly from a single father. In his account, he told me:

I'm not exactly sure how much it cost. Lost income was in excess of \$150,000 because of time in court proceedings . . . My lawyer cost me somewhere between \$10 and \$20,000. I changed lawyers towards the end and he got the thing sorted out.

The longer the divorce process takes and the more protracted and convoluted it becomes

the more money is made by professionals and the less the divorcing couple keep for themselves. In other words a number of professions in the “divorce industry” (Bohannon, 1985) benefit from ill feeling in divorce, from couples who do not have a “good divorce” (Aphrons, 1994), and one hears stories of this ill feeling in the field.

Here from my fieldnotes is a story of one woman who stood to lose the equity in the matrimonial home in a protracted battle with her husband over the value of his pension: L has been married 27 years and is not able to work, so when her husband left her she needed support. From my fieldnotes:

I have seen my lawyer and my ex-spouse refuses to accept the actuary's assessment and won't provide information on back pay, holiday pay and pay raises so that we can have disclosure about the finances. Mediation isn't working. He won't co-operate and he's drawing out the time till he retires in Jan. 2000. I'm looking at going to court to get what I should, except it could cost us ten to twenty thousand dollars a piece. It would eat up my share of the equity in the house and I would go to Nova Scotia with nothing in my pocket.

In this case, the husband would not disclose, and while his delaying tactics might be temporarily effective in dealing with his pension, they also put him at risk for wasting both his and his ex-wife's assets in a court battle. It looked like it was going to turn into a cautionary but all too common tale on how not to divorce. The money that was rightfully the couples would end up in the pockets of lawyers, because the couple could not settle.

The area of pension division is the least clearly defined, and therefore the most problematic issue when dividing matrimonial assets. In theory, all assets acquired during the marriage are put into a virtual receptacle, and then once liabilities have been subtracted, they are divided evenly. However, there are different approaches to valuing

pensions that make this “asset” complicated to measure, and thus it can be difficult to reach an agreement on its value (Payne and Payne, 1994).

Then there was the case of a mother with a court battle over her divorce settlement. In her account, she told me of the conflict she had with her husband over a settlement and that she had received substantial sums of money from family members to help pay her legal fees. *“My aunt met the bill. She probably thinks of that as a gift, I don't think of that as a gift.”* Meanwhile she is contesting a divorce settlement in which she signed over a business she and her husband owned and operated together. Her ex-husband now lives in the U.S:

I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place. In the meantime we've been cashing out RRSP's. All this because this is a game for him . . . I won't ask my family for money. They've all offered and I won't accept.

Meanwhile, in order to settle her case this mother is forced to spend large sums of money. In her account she estimates that with regards to how much she has spent, *“. . . at this point \$40,000 and no end in sight.”*

One example of the nature of divorce as a business is the number of professionals who of necessity become involved. Aside from the cost of the lawyers' service, there are other required professionals. This female informant gives her account of the involvement of professionals when her children became part of a custody battle between herself and her ex-husband:

The marriage was abusive, so there was a lot of verbal attacks and it continued after the marriage. . . . At one point I was fighting for sole custody because joint custody wasn't working . . . I decided to go to court and that was a nightmare because that dragged on for two years and my ex-husband started making false accusations against me like phoning the

Children's Aid and all that in order to help his case. So that there was a lot of professionals involved with the children, social workers. It ended up the children were appointed an Official Guardian . . . I thought by going through courts I would get justice. I learned the hard way . . . I wish I knew what I know now, but unfortunately the court doesn't work when it comes to settling family things.

This mother lost the custody of her children. Through these stories we see the applied nature of the law in families' lives and families remain dissatisfied with what they get. As I overheard one lawyer saying to a member of the general public after a divorce workshop, "No one is ever happy going to court, ever." Maybe the changes on the horizon are for the better. One can only hope so in that the nature of the law may change. A new language is proposed; it is suggested that custody and access be replaced with what will be called "shared parenting", according to a mediator whose seminar I attended.

From fieldnotes:

One of the main recommendations of the Parliamentary Committee was that there won't be a rich house and a poor house any more. It's not very popular with some, like the rich.

It seems possible that even with the proposed changes, and the efforts to reform the divorce process, divorce may continue as contentious as ever and require as much professional expertise as ever. It is in ways such as these that the professionalisation of this process may continue despite reform and thus contribute to the growth of the "divorce industry" (Bohannan, 1985).

The Gendered Experience

Moving from the financial and legal pitfalls of the divorce process, there are the gendered aspects of it. As well as elaborating on points from the above material which

begin to demonstrate the nature of the process for men and women, I will also deal with some of the ways in which the process is mediated by gender. Often informants would mention stories that showed how their experiences varied, though this was not a direct part of my questions. I found there were gender differences in the re-involvement in relationships. Beginning first with the accounts I heard from the men going through this process, I heard stories about the effects of separation and divorce from them that may help to illuminate the phenomenon of the rapidity with which men become re-involved in relationships. Women on the other hand tend to be busy with their lives and their children as they go through the divorce crisis in their lives. One male informant tells it like this:

So I'm single and this is scary. All of it. When you're fifty you're physically less capable, your sex drive is less, so if you're trying to find a new partner and you've got gray hair and you're about to become a grandfather, how attractive is this to the females out there?

This account is centred on his awareness of his own aging process. He also talks of the lacks that he became aware of in his accustomed manner of dealing with relationships. So in this story we see an account of how changes begin to be made. The same older male informant talks of how after the break up of his second major life relationship he knew he had to change:

I think prior to the break up with my ex, I was an archetypical male, I didn't put a lot of effort into relationships, wasn't comfortable about intimate things . . . At the end of this relationship I saw this could kill me or I could change. So I started to be very physically active and lost a lot of weight. I started to do things to correct things that were problems in my life. What really struck me was how little I had put into my relationships with people and how poor those relationships were.

It would seem that sometimes men are aware of the changes that are being required of

them at the moment of separation and divorce and do indeed take steps to remedy old patterns of behaviour. This informant began to make changes in his life because he felt that it was time to do so and he no longer had any choice. In the process he found new relationships and a new appreciation for women as friends and support mates in his times of need. Another male told me of the new relationships he found, post-divorce in a traditional male preserve: in his account his baseball team was of major importance and in his words it gave him *“a good sense of myself at a difficult time.”*

Aside from the socially gendered nature of the divorce experience, divorce is gendered financially. From the accounts, one sees that for the women, their struggle is one that is hard financially. Even if they have maintained a career post divorce there are burdens with children. They lose much over the divorce process and as part of the procedure join the ranks of the new poor. Their voices do indeed illustrate the feminisation of poverty. The account of the mother bringing up her disabled son alone, living on her son's disability pension as his full time caregiver, receiving no support from an ex-husband and beleaguered by a system that is overburdened and ill-equipped to deal with very real care-giving needs is one such face.

Some women do not stay in poverty and their roads out of their situation that I have heard from accounts, are remarriage to an ably-employed male or through investing in their own higher education, sharing resources and accommodation with other single women, or keeping a secure job. Some are lucky enough to have a career in a particularly stable field of employment and retain this throughout the process and for these women there is a stability that takes them and their children through the emotional upheavals of

the divorce process with a little more serenity than other less fortunate women. The career is indeed their insurance policy against hard times (Weitzman, 1985). For those who never had a career due to child rearing responsibilities (thus investing in the marriage and children rather than the market place) and those who lack education or who lose the job they did have due to ill health, for them their situation is doubly disadvantaged. They are disadvantaged by their health or dependence and then disadvantaged again by divorce.

For the men, according to their accounts, those with careers are to some extent protected from the financial consequences of divorce. I did not meet any who were paying support, so I have no accounts from males on the payment or non-payment of awards. Most men that I met were not required to pay support due to a variety of reasons, some of the accounts involved: having sole custody of the children, having joint custody of the children, their children were adults, and having no children. However, those men without careers on leaving a marriage were similarly impacted to women in that they too were impoverished initially by the divorce process. However, they were able to join the work place with greater ease and with greater prospects of advancement than the women as they adjusted to divorce and were able to continue post-divorce in the labour force. They tended to already have some skills and thus had work-place opportunities which women did not.

From the accounts we can see that men and women invest very differently in marriage and thus outcomes are different. This is a gendered reality. The concrete products of marriage such as assets and the marital home may be divided at the point of divorce, but the most valuable asset of all, access to the labour market (and the associated

benefits such as seniority, etc.) cannot be divided (Bittman and Pixley, 1997). The “private matters” such as deciding who should work in a marriage and who should not, at the point of divorce become rather more than simply private matters. If there is a lack of power in the household during the marriage this translates later at divorce into much fewer resources. For if women only invest in their relationship and do not develop labour market skills, they do not have portable investments at divorce. In essence domestic skills are not portable whereas mens’ investments in the labour market move with them when divorce occurs. Time spent moving for a husband’s career and time spent partially or wholly out of the labour force in order to care for children is time lost from investing in a career. The fact is there are poor returns for investing in domestic skills, child-rearing or relationship-specific skills (Bittman and Pixley, 1997:184) and this is borne out in the accounts of my informants.

We live an ideology of family that is in conflict with reality as we hear from the lives of these informants once divorce is in process. These accounts may be illustrative of the wider case of Canadian divorce in that this sample matches the G.S.S. in some respects, e.g. number of children, age of informant and religion. Here you see accounts of the causes of marital dissolution (such as abuse, substance abuse, adultery, growing apart and so on) as well as its effects, which range from personal loneliness to effects on children. Next we will look at how self-help groups provide a forum for the telling of these accounts and how these accounts are developed over time in a group of those who must similarly develop an account of the changes in their life that occur as they separate and divorce from former spouses.

Chapter Four

Support Groups: Their Structure And Discourse

The group is as good as the people in it.

It made it a bigger picture than what was just happening to me.

Part of this recovery and growth group was learning to express my own anger. Obviously if I had been able to I would have said you're making supper tonight buddy. That was the biggest thing about the buddy group it exposed me to a lot of normal people and it was mind boggling.

Introduction

Continuing with the data I obtained during fieldwork, this chapter will deal with the material that is pertinent to the self-help groups themselves. We have already discussed the material that is relevant to divorce and the situation individuals find themselves in before, during, and after divorce as part of that process. In order to deal with self-help addressing needs it is first necessary to understand how self-help works. With that established we will in the following chapter turn to the ways self-help provides support. In this chapter I will be detailing the language and rules of self-help groups for separating and divorcing people. In order to do so, it is necessary to divide my data from fieldwork into two main areas of interest. There is the structure of the groups such as their operating rules and their activities, as well as the discourse found in groups; that is the type of language and its content.

The self-help groups that I visited consisted of several kinds. One had public meetings once a month with forty attendees and associated smaller support groups for

eight to twelve people that met weekly. The smaller groups were organised by a buddy group organiser for the whole group. This group also ran a twenty-four hour support line. I visited each monthly meeting over a period of a year but did not attend the smaller group meetings. The small group that I did attend came together as a result of a workshop series of eight lectures on surviving separation and divorce organised by a network of local churches and advertised in the local paper: it was a group of five members. Another type of group that I attended was a women's organization. It held monthly seminars that I participated in over the period of the years' fieldwork. Depending on topic there were anywhere from four to twenty-five people on any given night. This organization for separated or divorced women was originated by one woman who was committed to political advocacy work. From contact with this group I joined two of their small support groups: a group of four women that I was part of for two months and a small support group for francophone women of twelve members that I participated in weekly from September to December 1999. The small francophone group was started by a young professional woman who worked towards political awareness and self-development for all women. None of these kinds of groups provided sponsors to new members though there was a general ethic that older members should help new ones.

There is a whole class of groups that I was not able to visit as a female researcher and those are the all male support groups. However from previous work with male researchers I knew these existed, many of which were support-like in nature (Bedford, Berg and Ramisch, 1995). Different groups had varying goals based on beliefs. They would describe themselves variously as spiritual or support-based. There would be a

greater or lesser degree of spirituality in these groups and a variety of activities such as weekend retreats, or drumming but as well many of these groups provided a self-help environment for their members. The differences seem to centre on the degree of comfort versus the degree of challenge each group provided as its chosen mode of providing help and support to the men. There were several types: the pro-feminist or those sympathetic to the goals of the women's movement and which thus had an activist orientation, the mythopoetic were inspired by writings such as Bly (1990) and Keen (1992) and the therapy-based that provided a program that structured both the group meetings and daily life. A male informant says:

Around 1982 . . . some of us came together for the purpose of doing some presentations, doing some workshops, in conjunction with a conference that was going on here in the city.

This collection of men began as an activist-oriented group. At the time of interview this group was still functioning, and is still today, but now purely as a support group. For the researchers in this study, in order to reflect the diversity of needs met in a group it was necessary to arrange the groups in a continuum. Whether they challenged men on their beliefs and lifestyle or whether they gave comfort in response to the men's needs depended upon the goals of the group, the needs it serviced and the belief systems it espoused. Part of this comfort-challenge continuum was the degree of activism as opposed to support the groups were involved in. At the same time some groups are very long lived.

Though there are now a variety of groups available, such as this range for men, support groups and the self-help movement have not always been with us. During the seventies and eighties, there was an increase in interest in self-help. A women's group

organiser I spoke to remembers how not very long ago it was hard to find a support group for separating and divorcing people in Throughtown. She tells how five years ago there were almost no support groups. Entry to one at that time was only at their inception thus one had to wait until the next one began in order to join.

Even a relatively small city such as Throughtown has a representative population of separating and divorcing people. According to the 1986 Census of Canada 3.5% of the population are divorced and 2.6% are separated at any point in time (Devereaux, 1988) thus we are talking of around 60,000 people in a town of a million such as Throughtown who are in the process of separation and divorce. In response to this demand, there have evolved enough groups in Throughtown that one can find at least one if not more groups that suit one's preferences.

In the main from my fieldwork, there seem to be two types of support groups. One is open support, which is how I would define self-help, and then there is closed support run by professionals, which I would not define as a self-help group per se. They are closed in the sense that one must register with the professional in order to join. Open ones tend to be located at public sites such as community centres and churches of various denominations. The main focus of the activities consist of members supporting one another through emotional crises at weekly meetings and beyond by phoning and visiting one another. Members tend to be at the same stage of development with the particular issue and all join at the same point in the separation process, so in this case, the members will be recently separated, likely within the last two years. Beyond this time frame the long term separated and divorced are usually not suited to most of these.

Each group has operating principles, that are explicitly or implicitly applied with reference to time limits, size, location, and the gender mix. In other words self-help groups have an internal structure and usually are typified by non-hierarchical relations. The groups did not have leaders as such but usually were run by consensus. If they were large enough, a board or some such body was chosen from the members. However, there is a protocol for behaviour in groups in terms of their functions and these protocols formed the rules.

Rules

Each group tended to have size limits and ideas about how time was to be structured. Most of the groups had guidelines, similar to the following. From a male informant I heard:

Rules are pretty standard. They always go through them before they go do anything else. The rules always involved some combination of respect for other people that it's a safe place to be . . . you can talk about yourself without fear of ridicule or shame . . . Confidential . . . You don't have to worry about it being spoken about on the outside.

This notion of a "safe space" recurs for members. These "commonsense" rules facilitate the creation of a "safe space" where members can, ". . . talk about things that might otherwise be difficult to talk about." The ground rules are that such a space is non-judgmental and accepting, in that there will be no blame, no criticism and no ridicule. The second rule was confidentiality, in that what was said in the group stayed there. The observance of these rules contributed to the ambience of these groups by creating an atmosphere of trust.

There were clear demarcations of time, i.e. so much speaking time per person, but

even so there were often over-runs. The major activities of the group that needed to be timed were “check-in” and sometimes “telling of stories.” “Check-in” involved the members recapping how their week had gone in order to bring everyone in the group up to date with the events and issues in their life. “Telling of stories” on the other hand was an opportunity for each member to tell the story of their separation and divorce in detail and this could and often did involve the story of the marriage from initial meeting and sometimes included a life history as well. The weekly “check-in” happened at the beginning of each meeting and the “telling of stories” only happened at the group’s inception. The “story” could become a continuing epic with an audience familiar with the previous episode. If someone tried to re-tell their account in detail, it would likely be a different story as a result of ongoing construction that occurred from the weekly sharing. “Check-in” could be extremely long although it was supposed to be a preamble to the main body of the meeting. The idea is to check-in with everyone and then proceed to the main task of the meeting which might entail more in-depth sharing for those most in need, or perhaps a presentation or thematic discussion. However, if there are seven people and they each take more than ten minutes it can take an hour and a half for everyone to speak. This can be because members interrupt one another and give advice while check-in is in progress or because some members just need to take longer than expected.

Even in groups that do have a clear philosophy about how time is demarcated and shared as it were, it is not all smooth running and the group has to be flexible enough to adjust to the needs of the particular members on a particular night without becoming impatient with one another or being overly demanding. Always the needs of the others

had to be somehow met as well as one's own needs. This perhaps is a profound teaching tool; the sharing of time with others, when one is needy oneself

If an individual violated the space allotted then the group may respond by restricting an individual to their "turn" in order not to deny others their share of time. As the group grew older, they might proceed through "check-in" on to other issues that the group had decided to discuss. As it matured, the members of a group might decide they wanted to undertake other activities together, such as camping trips, or discussing books that members had found helpful, or sharing meditations that one member felt were helpful for the group. The group might last as long as the members felt it was necessary, a few weeks, months, sometimes years.

As suggested earlier, not all groups had rules as clearly defined as those outlined above. There seems to also be a gender differentiation in the definition of rules. For women, the element of taking turns was more casual than what I heard from the reports of men-only groups, or what I observed in mixed groups. One woman in a female group told me:

*... we are good enough friends that we know if someone hasn't talked.
Last Sunday I talked and the other woman talked and we both said, how
was your week? That's what we usually say, how was your week? and that
gets us started.*

In general, when there are rules in place they are usually honoured. In fact often members were scrupulously careful to keep these rules once they were acquainted with them and made sure others in the group did so too. If these standards were not met then participants would bring the matter to the group as a whole. For example, there were the

rules with respect to speaking in turn. When the participants did not follow guidelines of respect, other members of the group would call them on it and make sure that the guidelines that were part of the environment were met. In one example that I witnessed when one participant wanted to tell her story, the whole group had to agree to her telling. The following illustrates this self-policing function of support group by members. (From fieldnotes):

Again and again throughout the evening J and R and B insist that it is someone else's turn and that N wait. At another point, B is giving N some advice and N just keeps on talking so B says sharply but firmly, "N do you want to listen to me?" and waits. N stops immediately and quietly says, "Yes."

This example however is not necessarily the norm for all groups. Not all participants were able to abide by rules of order or subject matter and then the group had the responsibility of dealing with that within itself. (Of course there are no professionals to turn to to deal with the working order of the group.) It seemed that often one member was able to contain the other member or members for the group, so that each story was heard in due course. Also members might disagree with one another intensely. For example, one woman informant tells this story of an incident at her woman's only group:

Two of our members got into a verbal battle at one meeting. They disagreed intensely about something and they went through the process of solving it. We watched. It was okay. It worked. Quite a modelling thing for the rest of us. How to resolve something without getting angry and hating the person for the rest of your life. No, it was really cool.

The ability to deal with conflict without getting angry is perhaps an implicit "rule."

Although this kind of dynamic is hard on the group as a group, members are very clear on how to monitor one another and themselves so they can collectively function.

Even though individuals are there to deal with crises in their life associated with separation and divorce they did not forget their social role in a community situation. They played their role and made sure others played theirs according to the rules. However sometimes this dynamic was not easy on the participants and could even result in individuals leaving the group altogether.

Sometimes groups needed to be structured with reference to content. This male informant talks about how sometimes their group would stray from their topic but that sooner or later, someone would bring them back to their mandate, which was to have deeper, meaningful discussions. It was felt that there were “*more serious issues to talk about.*” This was the way the group worked. As one group member put it:

*We can be doing more than this and should be doing more than this.
There are . . . issues to talk about . . .*

In this case it would be issues of common interest such as relationships and self awareness. Thus there is a clear sense of purpose for the groups in that they are for the individual to progress, to learn and that they are not merely a “social club.”

Group Size, Gender Composition and Location

Another fundamental issue was where to locate these groups. The solutions varied. Some met in homes, some in coffee shops and pubs, community centres, regional municipal offices or even in church basements. The size of the group was directly related to its meeting place. At inception, a group may meet in a variety of smaller spaces, including private homes. If the group was three or four people then meeting in public spaces such as coffee shops and book stores was also a definite possibility.

Although there was a variety of opinions about the optimum size for a group I discovered there was a natural limit in size to how well the groups worked. Wuthnow (1994) found groups functioned at around twenty people. However, there is a threshold beyond which a group no longer works when there are too many members. My informants told me that the optimum size was twelve people. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a size under which the dynamics of the group become somewhat unworkable, in that the group ceases to be a group as such. Meetings with only two or three attendees become inevitably focused on either one person or one topic and lose the interactions of a group that create community.

In one group I attended, while it was relatively small there were discussions about letting new people join, but this was a difficult topic for everyone because of the level of intimacy that was reached with the sharing of stories and the telling of day to day details of one's life. This problem never was resolved and in the end no new people did join. Though the group in theory wanted to welcome newcomers, it did not in actuality feel open enough to do so. It would have been necessary to catch up on old stories. It may be that the group has a life and maturity of its own and that newcomers cannot easily fit in. In this case, the group had reached a stage of intimacy where others could not easily join. Borkman (1999:197) has a similar finding, stating that each group has a trajectory of its own. This should not be surprising considering the intimate nature of the details that are discussed in the group once it has formed. This private sphere in the public world had a need for boundaries and perhaps this is where they are drawn, around the group once it has had its genesis.

Then there was the matter of the gender of the participants of the group. As noted, some groups are exclusively male, some are for women, and some mixed. There are benefits and drawbacks for each of these types of groups. There were also opinions as to the correct balance of men to women in a group. One informant felt there should be:

Equal number, six and six. That was the other reason we thought it was successful. We were all similar age, similar background and an equal number of males and females. Because I know a lot of the other groups didn't make it because there would be like eight women and one man . . . It seems these groups do not work because the men drop out; they feel the group is like "a hen party."

Without an adequate balance of men in the group, men definitely felt left out of the discussion and some women have said that they felt that the men were merely there to find social life, or women, and objected to that. To them, more equal sharing and giving and taking of support was necessary, and other agendas detracted from the groups' rightful focus. The men however enjoyed being with the women and appreciated their particular brand of female support.

Of course I am a female researcher and with that comes a tendency to collect female informants especially in this area. While attending groups I could easily approach the women but I was reluctant to approach the men. I never knew if they would mistake the request for an interview as a personal invitation. I did not want this in the emotional world of the newly separated and divorced. Thus I ended up with far more female respondents than male. There was both my own reluctance and the lack of access to these men and the necessity of relying on contacts that came more naturally through other women.

However, I will mention this “thirty something” young woman who talks of visits to support groups and how she experienced her interactions with men. She included in her discussion organised events:

Singles. I don't go to those things. They have dances and stuff once a month. That's just not my scene. To sit there in a dance hall and get picked up, no. I went there to see what the different meetings would be, to learn . . . I went to one meeting and I thought it was kinda neat and they went for a drink of coffee and I went with them. These men were hitting on me and that was the last thing I wanted so I didn't go back for two years. And then I went back and I was strong enough to tell them to buzz off, that's not what I'm here for.

So for this woman the singles scene was not what she was looking for in the wake of a contentious divorce case. However, it seems from informants the men were more interested in the singles scene.

Certainly I was hearing that men were becoming involved quite quickly in new relationships and re-entering matrimony sometimes rapidly. Informants were talking about this and the women elaborated on this. One woman talked about involvements in her support group, stating that the only remarried person was male. This effect is borne out by another informant who mentioned that in her support group the men were becoming involved or re-involved in relationships.

The groups can be an opportunity for discourse between men and women at a time when discourse between the genders could break down all together. One night a female participant in a support group of six thanked the men in her support group. She said:

I really appreciate you being in the group. It is good to have men in the group. I congratulate you for being here. It is not easy for you. But I am glad the two of you are here. It gives me insight.

In response to this one of the men in the group looked at his boots in a pleased sort of way and the other man gave her a full smile: *"Not all guys do this,"* he said, *"but it is worth it."*

Two male participants of this group left after the first one or two meetings. The task that was ahead of the group at that point in time was the telling of stories and it is likely that the public telling of one's story was not an activity that the first drop out wanted to take part in. The other male drop-out did tell his story and then never came back because he felt he had said too much, according to the other man in the group. There seems to be something in the telling of stories that comes more easily for women than for men.

Activities

The larger support groups were responsible for a variety of activities. The prime reason for their existence may have been the small support groups but their mandate did not end there. As well as organising the support groups there were also seminars on topics related to divorce, lunches, informal dinners and of course, Saturday night dances for singles. The groups provided many of these services to their members at little or no cost. Well-organised groups had a social secretary who would make sure that there was an adequate schedule of social events for the members. However, the back bone of the whole structure was the small support group which I heard called a "buddy system," in one such organisation.

One of the main activities of the groups beside support were seminars. These were generally open to the public and usually part of the post-seminar activities was a visit to

the local pub. Speakers at seminars were invited to talk on topics related to separation and divorce in the broadest sense. There were talks from a variety of professionals who worked with children, from child psychologists to social workers, on topics such as Attention Deficit Disorder. Finances were another major topic. Titles included “Business and Employment in The Nineties: Employment Search Strategies,” “Career Re-orientation,” and “How to Buy a House or Apartment on a Shoestring Budget.” Another topic that was covered in seminars was health in the broadest sense of the word. There were seminars on the individual and self-esteem and coping mechanisms. There were for example: “Sexology,” “Massage and Aromatherapy,” “Beauty at any age,” and “Reflexology.” There were speakers who were practitioners of aromatherapy, homeopathy, chiropractic, and healing touch, to mention just a few. This alignment with alternative healthcare therapies as opposed to mainstream biomedical healthcare is interesting. The group members were open to using self-healing whenever possible as opposed to simply relying on the established professions. For example, they did use professionals such as counsellors when they felt the need but were not solely dependent on them and used self-help in conjunction with professionals or replaced professional help with a group when they felt this was most beneficial to them.

Social Networks and Instrumental Help

The net result of all these social events was that people were indeed helped, and one of the major ways was in the making of new friends. It is well-known in the literature that during and after divorce there is a breaking of old relationships that were couple-based, as mentioned in chapter one (Guttman, 1993: Bohannon, 1968). Thus at a time

when individuals need more from their friends, not less, they may well be losing their old social network. Self-help groups offer an environment where one may replace a social network lost through the divorce process. They are a place where people meet and become comfortable with one another. Friendships can develop where initially individuals were strangers. Informants talked about this process and the length of connection with fellow support group members. These relationships can sometimes be for years, and the longest I heard of was more than ten years.

Practical help can also be offered by these groups. One woman talked about how her support group helped her move house (and leave her husband at the same time). She tells how she managed her leaving:

I got a feeling about it. And then I did it and my support group came over. My husband was in Toronto for the weekend. One of the members was in charge of the whole thing really. I was just a basket case . . . (they) took charge of the moving and packed me and moved me out of the house.

In this case the support group was the woman's community and helped her leave a marriage that she no longer wanted for herself or her children.

Another offering from the group is advice. It is freely given and sometimes certain members are more knowledgeable than others about the resources that are available to them. For example, one informant told a group of her emotional upheaval. The group dealt with it in the following way (from fieldnotes):

J interrupts her. "Do you ever call a crisis line when you are feeling suicidal?" she asks. N admits she hasn't. She says, "I am seeing my psychiatrist tomorrow." J is obviously in favour of the crisis lines. She tells N that's what they are there for.

One informant described how she had been unable to be angry or assert herself

either in her marriage or post-marriage dissolution. She concluded that women:

. . . use depression. We don't know how to be angry. I didn't know how to be. I'd go (to the group) and say "I said f--- off to my ex and hung up." "Do you think this is okay?" They'd say yes!

In other words feedback or mirroring of actions was offered. This informant needed others to respond to her actions and responses in order to understand her own processes. She described herself as requiring this type of help. She needed to think aloud with others and once outside her marriage she found it necessary to have a venue for this and the group was able to provide both this mirroring and the advice to go with it.

Another example touches on the previous issue of men and new relationships. For example, one male informant described the kind of advice a man may encounter in an all male group. He told this story of a man who moved quickly post-marital dissolution into a new relationship and the advice he would receive in a men's group:

. . . He had moved out and four weeks later he was seriously dating, sleeping with a woman. Those guys were really fast. You'd have people going up and down you with a buzz saw in a men's group if you ever did that, because that's stupid, you shouldn't be getting involved with people like that.

The dynamics of the group allow for the opportunity to help others and to be a helping voice. In a group there are individuals who have sought similar solutions due to life changes and have found answers in a variety of ways. However, group members do not necessarily accept this proffered knowledge uncritically and may resist the advice being offered.

Meaning Construction

Rather than assuming that self-help groups are a place to "whine" about one's ex

or situation in life, as one bartender referred to their activities, it is necessary to understand that something rather different is occurring through group activities. Through the mechanism of sharing a life-changing event it can happen that a new identity is created, and this identity is formed within the group. There is a resonance with fellow “travelers” (Klass, 1994). Part of the process is in gaining new values or behaviours and most important of all what is provided is a “. . . different cultural frame or meaning system with which to interpret or make sense of their personal or collective situation” (Gidron and Chesler, 1994:11). This meaning system with which to interpret one’s experience is derived from the day-to-day activities of the group and also the exercises that some of the self-help groups use.

Informants talked about their experience with courses that they took that were offered through their self-help groups. As part of these courses there were booklets covering topics such as the emotions, stress, the implications of divorce, issues for children, being a teenager in a single parent family, the cost versus the benefit of a relationship, mourning, and how to create your future. In another course that was originally a business skills training seminar adopted by the self-help group there were worksheets to fill out in order to do self-assessment. One had to write down on the worksheets one’s Assets, Deficits, Excesses and Gaps, and how one could remedy the latter. From exercises such as this one’s meaning construction could be moulded. From a life situation that is usually full of blame and guilt, through the activities of the group, especially such directed ones as “the Letter” exercise (writing a letter to one’s ex-spouse), the meaning of divorce may be transformed. For example, one of my informants said:

*So we have to take responsibility, you can't just blame the other person.
It's not healthy to blame the other. It's more beneficial this way.*

One can see from her description of her divorce experience how her understanding of her marriage and its demise had been shifted.

What we understand as “cure” according to the medical model happens through self-help in the following way (Kennedy and Humphreys, 1994:182): the client or the victim changes their worldview in order to accommodate the changes that have occurred in his or her life. It seems that humans are interpreters of their environment and the structure of the individual's worldview has a significant effect on psychological health. The way we interpret the world (our operative worldview) is changed by stress and when this happens assumptions about the world may need to be changed in order to find meaning in the stress and thus recover from the event. Kennedy and Humphreys (1994) suggest that self-help groups may be places where worldview is transformed and thus self-help can be seen as an alternative treatment experience or a learning from others.

The length of the divorce process was of interest to me as a researcher in that individuals may be in groups over a longer or shorter period of time. The longer members participated in a group the greater exposure they received to exercises for meaning-construction. The group I stayed in the longest lasted from March 1999 to April 2000 when one of the members remarried. Thus the exposure to meaning construction and making of accounts lasted over a year, by which time new versions of accounts were being told in the group.

Borkman (1999:7) refers to the meaning perspective of a self-help group as

providing a particular reading of a given situation. Depending on the perspective of the group different degrees of change are required of the individual personally and in lifestyle. This may range from coping skills to transformation and Borkman (1999:8) suggests that the degree of stigma is related to degree of change required by the group -- an interesting correlation. Her argument is that all self-help is a response to stigma both from those close to one and from those farther removed socially. Each group has a viewpoint and so long as that group viewpoint is not too far from that of a potential participant, he or she will join. If it is too far removed from that of the individual then participation is unlikely and the transformation of worldview will not occur through self-help and perhaps other routes are chosen, such as professional help.

It seems that self-help provides several services, in powerful combination, an opportunity to make friends, to gain advice and instrumental help and reconstruction of the meaning of the events of divorce. This is in line with Borkman's (1999) and Lavoie's (1994) description of how self-help works. For Borkman self-help offers learning in the "commons" or community and for Lavoie, self-help offers a learning of a new culture from the group's way of being, both of which seem to be primary functions of self-help. In fact, Borkman and Lavoie's interpretations are borne out by my own observations and experiences.

Sources of Discourse

As well as the structure of a self-help group and the activities of the associated members there is the kind of discussion or talk that one finds there. There are many sources from which the discourse of self-help is derived. By discourse I mean the kinds of

language, topics and world-views that I encountered during fieldwork. This discourse was to be found in books, through speakers, by attending courses and it has been articulated into an accessible discourse appropriate for the self-reconstruction projects of those who attend groups.

In addition to providing meaning through group activities, individuals also found their own sources of discourse. This was provided through the books and courses (For the ones I encountered during field work please see Appendix 4 which is a list drawn from my fieldnotes). These books ranged in topic from biography to self-help manual, or how to use all of your potential. There were books on relationships such as *Mars and Venus Starting Over* (Gray, 1998) and how to gain love. There were empowerment texts for women such as *The Woman's Book of Courage* and many books on how to heal oneself and one's life. Then there were business skills manuals and sports achievements guides. Finally, some titles came directly out of the co-dependency literature associated with AA groups. This is one of the ways AA is influential in self-help groups. Such books covered the co-dependent individual, the adult child of alcoholic parents and how to free relationships from co-dependent dynamics.

The amount of self-help literature to choose from was large and the validation of these books seems to come from the exposure the authors have through the media: "Oprah" is the final validation, or so I heard from some of my informants. I heard this on two occasions during fieldwork. Once was when John Gray author of the Mars and Venus series had appeared on Oprah and his discussions were mentioned in group. Another time a member of a support group had discussed the coming appearance of a self-

help author (Iyland Vasant; *"In the Meantime"*) on the same show and recommended that the others should watch the show in order to hear the author speak. According to the self-helper Vasant had had a hard life but was an inspiration to others. The fact she was appearing on Oprah acted as an insurance of the quality and veracity of the book due to the regard Oprah received from the group member in question.

One of the ways in which the contents of books were distributed is that they were used as learning tools for others. The groups were an ideal way to circulate knowledge, informally without an institution such as a church, school or university. Materials were brought and shared by members. Informants might hand out sheets of sayings that they had collected or prayers that they have printed up. For example, one night at a group, members were discussing material a member had bought on stress entitled "Thriving in Hyper-change: A Personal Case Study in Stress Control," which included a section on "Core Beliefs of those Who Thrive in Hyper-change or 'Managing Stress.'" In this case the member was explaining how skills she acquired through work training were relevant to her group of separating people.

Groups quite freely appropriated the knowledge and skills of established professions (therapists for example) and used what they understood on their own. There was no questioning of the validity of the material or of the need of a therapist. If a group member had felt the need of a therapist and many had, then they would seek one out who was to their liking, but in the meantime the tools of that profession were grist to the self-help mill, as were books from professional disciplines.

The group might also derive material not only from therapy, but also from the

clergy, who formerly would have led a congregation in meditation and were assumed to have that particular skill set, endowed by God to lead others. Here there was no recognised need for a professionalised, sanctioned spiritual force and thus a single member would lead others in her version of meditation. The same manoeuvre could be followed for social work and its skill set in that the tools of social work could be put to use for the group by a group member sufficiently familiar with them.

The amount of jargon that I came across was vast. This is not surprising considering the self-help literature derives discourse from many disciplines and professions that have a long history. While ignoring the particular roots and boundaries of those disciplines, self-help took the concepts it required and then used them in order to solve day-to-day problems in the setting of the group.

Discourse Content

Self-help members needed a language with which to speak of their situation. Access to these words helped them find a “voice” where before their world experience had been marginalised and to some extent silenced. Ebaugh (1988) refers to the stigma that even now is associated with the divorced and it is this stigma and loss of social status that results in one being at the margins. This is especially difficult if one had previously been part of a powerful dominant discourse. The notion of the nuclear family complete with husband and wife, with breadwinner/homemaker and children is one such discourse. The losses of statuses here are great and the transfer of status to an ex may be difficult and lengthy (Ebaugh, 1988). So it must necessarily be empowering to have access to a discourse, perhaps any discourse at a time when one’s experiences are marginal, especially

when one's life experience has previously been part of a dominant discourse.

I heard discourses in both groups and public seminars. There were a few main themes: one on relationships, a second around children, parents and parenting; and a third around subjective states such as depression, anger and grief -- states that were more or less directly related to the separation and divorce process, as well as strategies, tools and techniques for finding meaning and healing.

Marriage

Firstly there was a discourse on relationships, which I would suggest is probably the core of all the other discourses, or at least a meta-discourse from which other lesser discourses spring. One of the fullest expositions of a relationship discourse that I heard in the field was from Dr. Anderson, a psychiatrist and author of a self-help manual for surviving separation and divorce entitled *On Your Own Again*, (Anderson and MacSkimming, 1995). The author had been separated and divorced and this gave him material to write a self-help book on the separation and divorce process. He had both the direct experience and the psychological training in order to frame his thoughts into a manual for others. He described the stages that he himself had experienced and the model of relationships that he used for his patients. There were stages for both adults and children and a rationale for why some marriages fail and some succeed. According to Dr Anderson's view of the world, adolescence lasts up to 25 years old and most marriages are contracted during that time. The type of relationship one sees at this time, is the "I'll take care of you, if you'll take care of me" type (Anderson and MacSkimming, 1995). Eventually this type of relationship is outgrown as marriage partners, often out of step

with each other start to move onto the stage of “being their own person,” resulting in 50% of marriages splitting up, 25% staying together locked into a sort of mutual hate, and the other 25% resolving issues and moving onto the next phase.

As Dr. Anderson is a psychiatrist his discourse relies on the tenets and concepts of his professional training. This particular discourse uses his professional jargon such as transitional object, developmental stages, and differentiation. The personal experience of the material is in line with the self-help and AA models of support in that the ‘experts’ have experienced the ailment or problem under discussion. However, although this type of expertise is grounded in experience and this may be applied it may also lack other aspects of expertise such as objectivity and broader bases to knowledge. Having direct experience may also give rise to agendas, political or personal that may be served by the individual’s interest. Personal experience does seem to add to credibility for self-help members probably because all self-help groups are based on a certain set of politics -- that of self-made professionals, those who are experts in the field of their life experience.

Related to this discourse on relationships is a talk that I heard from a mediator on the post-marital state. Here I heard a description of an aspect of divorce known as “negative intimacy,” which I would argue is part of the relationship discourse of the self-help world and could be added to Dr Anderson’s model of relationships as an addendum for the stages of relationship in the post-marital dissolution experience. This is drawn from *Mum’s House, Dad’s house* by Isolina Ricci, referred to by the mediator as the mediator’s bible. According to the mediator’s model of post-marital relationships, what was necessary was to make a business relationship with the former partner. The mediator

defined “negative intimacy” as the intimacy from a marriage, where one knows everything about the other person and yet there is no longer a relationship. Negative intimacy then, was the left-over closeness from the marriage, imbued with negative emotion from the former relationship. To move beyond negative intimacy it was necessary to change to a business relationship, where ordinary civility applied, but no special privileges were expected nor was personal knowledge of the other person acknowledged or desired.

The source of the discourse in this case was legalese and social work concepts rather than a psychological discourse. However, once again, the mediator had himself experienced separation and divorce and was using his professional training and direct experience to frame experience for others. Tools such as Dr. Anderson’s work, or the advice on negative intimacy were important parts of the new language, of how to think and speak of one’s situation post separation and divorce.

Kids, Parents and Parenting

There was a discourse about children that was articulated throughout the meetings, and particularly at seminar sessions offered by most support groups. There was a reliance on professionals and their expertise yet at the same time individuals obviously valued the structure of the self-help group, and the provision of help available for their problems with children. There was a variety of models of the family to be learned. At a monthly support group meeting for men and women I heard a child psychologist’s model. The psychologist drew parallels between the family and a “company” in that parents are known as “Management” and the children were the employees. Her definition of parenting was : 80% of the time you are doing damage control and 20% of the time you are acting,

pretending to know what you are doing. She defined the adult's job as very different to the child's job. If a child was confused he might become unhappy with his job and disappear into the child's world. However if the parent did not do the management job, then the children may simply take over and get bossy.

Another discourse on children I heard came from a social worker working mainly with children. Here the problem of divorce for children was described as one of human relations, that is to say if the emotions were managed appropriately then the outcomes for children, and for all, would be better. What was suggested was that talking about the problem made children better. This is an unstated ideology on the part of this particular profession, in that conflict management is paramount and particularly so in the case of divorce. This discourse did suit some of the clients some of the time, particularly those cases of divorce where there was high conflict, yet it was used as a dominant source of discourse for children of divorce, whatever the nature of the family divorce process.

Healing and Spirituality

In attending seminars I came across alternative therapy practitioners of every ilk. Organisers invited these speakers because they felt they were relevant to the stress that was experienced during divorce. There was a wide variety of therapies dealing with different aspects of self with an accompanying variety of claims. This healing aspect of the self-help world view drew on many disciplines and part of this discourse on health was the validating and normalising of certain kinds of alternative health care. I attended a lecture given by a chiropractor to a large self-help group in which the chiropractor discussed the necessity of chiropractic adjustment as a requirement for health in the same way that

dentistry check-ups are considered the norm. In this case despite lack of symptoms, a need for regular care was emphasised by the practitioner.

Beyond chiropractic another system dependent on subjective evaluation that I encountered was a form of hands on healing that was Japanese in origin namely, “Jin Shin Jyutsu.” This seminar took place at the A.G.M. (Annual General Meeting) of a self-help group. (This was an association that was big enough and well enough organised to have a set of objectives and officers. In fact my presence on the board was requested but I declined as I thought I might become too embroiled in political advocacy before my fieldwork and the analysis of data was completed.) At this presentation the audience was encouraged to try holding certain places on their palms to see how energy flow changed. This was also demonstrated on one of the audience members who volunteered to be treated in front of us. We were told we could use the “Jin Shin Jyutsu” to realign the energy flow through the “safety energy blocks” which get obstructed with energy. During the seminar I noted that some of the terms were very specialised and to be found only in this particular system of healing. Thus this was a symbolic system in and of itself that needed to be understood as such. It seemed to me that only those inside the system would understand all that was being said.

Aside from complete systems of healing such as chiropractic and “Jin Shin Jyutsu”, there were models of healing described as part of seminars that I heard. One speaker gave a lecture on relationships in which there was a wide application of AA values and yet the speaker it seemed was from a particular kind of church movement. This was “Serenity Renewal,” a religious organization that concerned itself with addiction problems.

He spoke in the style of a preacher and yet the words were not the words of a known religion but expressions drawn from the literature of the self-help world. In the question period, he described what may be called the theory of cure behind his method. He said that the more one talked, and talked out the problem, the more the pain associated with the problem would go away. I was impressed with the force of his conviction. This was a belief system that focused on the discussing of pain as good. Part of this included an awareness that emotions should be discussed and acknowledged in order to recover.

Self-help seems to be largely based on this “talk” model, which would account for their dependence initially on psychology and professionals. Speaking and storytelling is an integral part of the small group way according to Wuthnow (1994:25). Informants used self-help to talk about and thus transform their experience. This transformation is part of the group dynamics of storytelling and interpretation and it is this combination that contributes to making self-help what is.

Much of the understanding in self-help is derived from AA. However, for the groups the major difference is their use of professionals as a resource for their seminars. Groups will take help from a variety of published sources. Part of the difference here is that AA has a central text that lays out guidelines for members. For self-help there is no central text to adhere to but rather a variety of self-help literature is available. So self-help groups’ interests go beyond the support group to include seminars in wider but related fields. As well due to the lack of text any member can provide the group with information drawn from courses, books or work (see Appendix 4) and these materials can be used as a focus for group discussion. These books and courses then can be the basis for personal

change and subsequent reappraisal of accounts that have been given to the group. This type of activity could not be a focus in AA type groups.

For self-help groups to work they need more than the talk that is employed in seminars and groups, there is also the necessity for structure such as rules for organising time and space. There are rules of conduct to be met and standards for group composition. There are different types of activities that are offered both during the times of the groups meetings and after in the daily life. As a result of this well articulated community of support that was available to those who took advantage of it for coping with their separation and divorce process, certain benefits were to be experienced. In the following chapter I will be describing those benefits and the ways in which self-help provides them to its members.

Chapter Five

How Support Groups Help

To heal you have to go through the process of going back to your inner life, then you go back through the emotions and then you are ready to go on.

I had family here.

With an understanding of how self-help groups work within themselves and where their discourse comes from, we can turn to the ways in which they provide support to people and meet needs that may not be met elsewhere. From this comprehension of self-help's benefits we can proceed in Chapter VI to conclusions about self-help's value and some insights into the nature of relationships in our culture.

So far informants have talked about the effects of marriage dissolution in several main areas of interest. I organized the interview material into themes in order to form a story that may represent the voices. The major themes were finances, health issues and the toll on the mind, body and emotions. Then there are the issues facing children, the gendered nature of the divorce process and the personal crisis that is sometimes attendant on the divorcing experience, a crisis that can include issues of faith and belief.

Given the experiences that informants describe as resulting from their separation and divorce process, it seems that support is required. Support groups may meet the needs for some people. Certainly something is happening here and a lot of people are meeting in groups as families change, dissolve and recombine. However what is actually going on? What role is self-help playing for people who are going through separation and

divorce? It is my argument that self-help is benefitting separating and divorcing people in a number of ways: facilitating the creation of accounts, re-socialising members and providing various mental health benefits as well as a form of family through what I call the “quasi-kin” nature of these groups. However, before I can deal with “benefits of self-help” I need to first analyze the context in which these groups operate. I will do so by analysing the other forms of support that are traditionally available to people as well as comparing those who seek out self-help for coping with separation and divorce as compared with those who do not. In each case I will be relying on the stories of my informants for the answers to these questions, as I seek to give voice not only to their experience, but to their understanding of those experiences.

Support Sources Other than Self-help Groups

There were three main groups of people from whom my informants found support outside of their self-help groups: friends, family and professionals. Firstly I would like to analyse how the family was used by individuals going through separation and divorce. Sometimes when I asked, to whom are you closest, I would be told that it was family members. For example in answer to who gives you support I was told, “. . . *my own family. Like I can always rely on them. I've got a brother, not that close but he's always there for me.*” And a young woman, told me, “*My sister . . . she lives in Throughtown and she's very supportive.*”

It is also relevant how geographically proximate the family is to the separating or divorcing person. In other words is self-help support sought because there are no family close by or is it because the family that is nearby do not supply the right kind of support?

Perhaps they are unable to give support or maybe they supply support but it is just not enough. Informants do say they do not want to burden near ones with the telling of their troubles over and over and are aware that they need to take their troubles elsewhere and talk to others. So for example, there is the older woman who uses different family members. *"I have another sister I'm close to but not as close. So it's between her and the other one who lives in Undersuburb."* I asked about frequency of contact and heard replies such as, *"Once a week."* and, *"I phoned . . . my sister, two or three times a day."* This sister was in Ohio. In other words contact was regular and sustained despite family being far away.

Then there were the different kinds of help. There was of course, emotional support and the most concrete aid of all, that of financial assistance. Family, it turns out, is most likely to provide material support. One informant told me about her aunt who helped fund the legal costs of pursuing her ex-husband to obtain more support: *"I wouldn't be where I am today if she hadn't helped me."* Financial help if it is going to come, will mostly be from family. For example, *"At different times I've had financial help from friends, mostly from family. They have the resources . . . Like my mother, my parents . . ."* However, family help can also be a two-edged sword.

There can be negative feedback from the family, when the couple needs to take their own path, as is the case with this young family as they attempt a reconciliation:

The relationship with my parents, my brother has become very estranged due to this attempt at reconciliation, very strained.

Couples may find relationships with parents difficult. They may even keep the reality of

separate lives from their parents. One informant said of her parents:

They really liked my husband and we kept our estrangement from them and so they didn't know, even though we had been living apart for a year.

So although there was good and sustained contact with family despite factors such as geographic distance, still there were problems with family help. It seemed perhaps that in a general way it may have been "agenda driven" in that parent's interests could be decidedly different from their adult children's.

Some individuals preferred to go to professionals rather than friends or family. It was their chosen route to find help and support when relationships were difficult. One older woman, single after thirty-five years of marriage, discusses her relationship with her therapist as compared to other relationships in her life:

I can't say that I'm close to anybody. I'm closer to my psychiatrist than anybody. I don't trust anybody. I never really did to start off with but my family found that difficult. If something went wrong I always went for professional help. I wouldn't go to someone in the family. I don't have any sisters and I have one brother, he divorced before me.

Again for another female informant, the person she was closest to was her counsellor. She had known her a long time and felt she was "Probably the person I'm closest to . . . the one who knows the most about me." However, these two were the exception rather than the rule. Most individuals preferred the closeness of friends and family rather than the therapists. Yet the professionals filled very specific needs for certain individuals who did not find their family suited their support requirements.

Then the role of friends was important in the post-separation and divorce stage. However, as part of the separation process many will lose friends at this time

(Guttman, 1993). Friends may not wish to take sides as the couple parts or they may be unclear about the boundaries they now need to maintain with the post-divorce individuals. Part of the difficulty is that the roles are unclear in the whole society. At the same time as this dilemma is unfolding for the formerly married couple, their friends may be leaving them. Initially friends may be supportive but they may eventually need to distance themselves from the situation (Guttman, 1993). Amongst my informants then, the support that came from friends was often from new ones, friends who were able to sympathise with, rather than be threatened by, separation and divorce.

Some of my informants felt that some friends can help with some issues better than others:

I have a very good network of friends . . . there's different experiences that I think other people are better at helping me with.

Then specifically there were the ways in which friends had helped. For one young mother her friend was a “confidante”:

She's a bit older than I am. Someone that I draw from . . . She helps me with things in my life. She's someone to have a heart to heart talk with.

There are the friends who are there for you, people you could call and they would, “. . . listen to me, offer me advice, just help through hard days” and this advice helped with feelings of being overwhelmed and depressed. Then there are the very old, life long friends, such as friends from high school that the person may have known for twenty years. There are also newer friends made since the divorce process had begun and who are companions in that process. In fact here the friendship plays a different role. It could be said to be one of re-socialising the individual into the new role, that of being a single

person while letting go of the former role. One informant says:

My friends have gone through similar experiences and I knew I could count on them . . . we would also get together and try to socialise because I think when you separate you lose a lot of your married friends. I didn't have any friends. My ex-husband alienated a lot of my friends that I had previously. Basically when I separated it was me and the children and that's why I decided I needed help.

This informant's loss of her social network post-divorce is a common experience (Guttman, 1993). However, some people do keep certain friends. One informant talks about what a real friend is to her, especially in the difficult days post-divorce when friends are unsure where their loyalties lie:

You find who the true friends are after separation because they're the ones that stay . . . The relationship after separation is quite different . . . Now being single, the husband doesn't want to know anything about you. They feel some kind of loyalty to the other spouse or whatever . . . They're still your friends but it's a different relationship.

Although relationships of all kinds are fractured by the divorce process and there is a 'breaking of the social bond' still it is old friends and new ones made post-divorce who offer the most support compared to family.

Broadly speaking, for my informants, friends are the most important resource of all and that is followed by family. Family members are sometimes to be counted on for that most concrete resource of all, money. When times are hard post-divorce and they often are, due to legal costs or merely the cost of setting up and running two houses and two cars, family can be a financial support. At the same time, some informants experienced disapproval from family members, thus depending on the case, one's family may not be the

best source of support.¹ Finally, in my sample, the professionals are the least counted upon resource of all, but for a few people, professionals are their favoured route for support and companionship.

People who do not use Self-Help for Support

I may have an unusual group here, those who choose self-help as opposed to those who do not. Some people may not feel the need for support, they may have what they feel to be adequate support from a network of friends, old or new. They may have family or professionals who fulfill their needs for support in helpful ways so that the individual does not need to look further. In order to look at this I took note of stories of those who did not use self-help groups, as told by their self-help friends. As we were dealing with separation and divorce, there were specific ways in which individuals differed or thought they differed from others who were part of the divorcing populations.

One of the key differences was offered by an older female informant's view of this, *"I think there are two kinds of separation, the ones that leave and the ones that are left behind."* According to this informant then, there are two kinds of people post-divorce, the leaver and the left and it is those who are left who need the group. In this study of twenty interviewees, eleven informants had been left by their former partners and spouses, six had been leavers and three I had inadequate information on them. Thus in this work the majority of participants in groups were indeed those who had been left. In this informant's

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There was no mention of grandparents and their assistance or their needs for contact with grandchildren nor children's needs for grandparents throughout the year I spent in the field. This is interesting if only in its absence from the data.

account, those who are left were qualitatively different from the leavers in that the issues they were dealing with subsequent to marriage breakdown were unlike those of the leavers. According to Guttman (1993) those who leave are able to recover more quickly, have more power in the relationship and have a head start on the whole process because they may have prepared their departure for some time. Perhaps it is not unreasonable to suggest that more of the “left” rather than the “leavers” take recourse to self-help groups: certainly this was true for my informants.

Further understanding was offered into why some individuals join a self-help group and others will not. According to an older female informant on the subject of those who will not join:

They don't want to admit most of the time. They don't want to go to any group or get therapy. If you go to a psychiatrist, you're crazy, that's automatic. That's one of the reasons that they don't want to go.

For some then the stigma associated with divorce is intensified if one admits to requiring support, especially from a professional or a self-help group.

Self-helpers did compare themselves with non-self-helpers. One insight I gleaned from my informants was that it took longer for people to progress through their individual divorce process without self-help “*They don't go through it as fast as someone who went through the group sessions. I think it's longer otherwise . . .*” says one female informant.

Self-helpers have friends who are also divorced but for them the divorce process takes longer. These outcomes are heard from the male informants too in that they see friends caught up in the process and taking a while to work through it. As one male informant said:

(They) . . . sorta belabour and feel bad about the same issues each year . . . I belabour the issues but I want to get rid of them. The idea is, if we're gonna talk about them let's work toward a solution.

In these ways self-helpers describe the group as encouraging learning and moving ahead with the process of adjustment.

Another difference I saw emerging from my informants' stories was how the learning environment provided to them by their self-help group was superior to other forms of support, and thus of course those who made use of these resources were likely to be better off. Self-help was a learning environment, as we see from this informant:

I learned and . . . I don't think you can if you don't go through a support group . . . how can you know by yourself? Not reading the steps and it's only been two years.

This informant refers to reading the steps of a course she took through a self-help group. Through courses such as these people were able to learn. I often heard that people could learn to do better, to "*become better human beings.*" My informants felt that those who use self-help are "*less likely to do the same things over and over again.*" Again and again I heard this as I listened to self-helpers talk about how they dealt with issues as compared to non-self-helpers.

Another way in which self-helpers learn is a new attitude to relationships. There were stories of the rebound romance and the role that self-help groups can play in this potentially emotional situation. A number of my informants said that without working out emotional issues an individual stood in very real danger of repeating costly mistakes again. They may go from one relationship and "*. . . jump into another one when they're not ready. I think you have to deal with the loss of the marriage.*" said one informant. With

the help of a support group on the other hand the person was “. . . *made aware of those issues.*” According to my informants’ accounts of the divorce process if one did not work on the issues of the previous relationship then the next relationship was likely to fail and the one after that was, in the words of an informant, likely to fail “*even worse.*” I was told that it is not only the protagonists who suffer in this, but bystanders too: this could play out in the lives of their children. One informant told me:

I think of one man I used to know. He had a very young daughter and his wife had left him. He dated different women and it was awful for the little girl because she would get attached to the woman. Things wouldn't work out and she'd leave and another would come. It was devastating for this little girl . . . I don't want to put them (the children) through that.

There was in fact censure for this kind of behaviour after divorce from those who were part of self-help groups. One male informant was quite critical of the behaviour of some men post-divorce, who moved right into new relationships after separating from their wives. He spoke of the need to instead do some “. . . *housekeeping, some re-orienting.*” This re-orientation could be the need to let go of old roles before one is able to take on new ones.

The speed with which the old role is relinquished and the new one -- that of the ex -- is taken on, seems to be greater with the aid of others with similar experiences. So perhaps we can conclude for those who sought out self-help, they likely made progress in adjusting to their divorce more easily than they would have if they had not sought out self-help. At the initial stage of divorce when anxiety is present, therapy is often sought (and I would suggest that it is at this stage that people often seek out and find a support group). A vacuum experience can accompany this early phase of separation in that the individual is

still partly living in the past, looking to the future but without grounding in the present. It is possible that there is even carry over identity where ex-es cannot shed their previous role and they consciously or unconsciously keep them going after they have supposedly left them behind. So previous roles may still be powerful influences in an individual's world. I would suggest that self-help groups here may be a place to enact new, alternate roles that eventually replace a powerful previous role that an individual is having difficulty shedding. So as compared to those who did not use self-help groups, self-helpers had chosen an environment in which to add new information, to associate with others in order to learn. Without that exposure to a place to enact new roles, those who did not seek out self-help could take longer to take on their new ex role as compared to self-helpers.

We have looked at how self-helpers draw support from other resources such as family, friends and professionals, and seen something of their opinions of how they differ from those who have not availed themselves of self-help. We also see something of their understanding of the benefits of self-help. It is to this we will now turn, the benefits of self-help as seen through the eyes of my informants.

BENEFITS OF SELF-HELP

In the following we will deal with some of the benefits of self-help such as the creation of accounts, improvements to mental health and re-socialisation. Sometimes wants are addressed in self-help groups in concrete ways, and sometimes the ambiance of the self-help group is what people need post-divorce. For example, given the alienating experience of divorce and the loss of one's social group, the sharing of intimate matters with strangers and the companionship of others like oneself may be exactly the kind of

experience one needs at that time. While I was participating in the self-help environment I noted how individuals behaved towards one another. From my fieldnotes:

As we waited for the start of the meeting I noticed a group of people standing in the aisle, they were greeting one another and hugging each other in the process. Enthusiastic hugs seemed to be how to behave.

This kind of familiarity in public seems to be part of what the groups offer for those who choose it; the warmth of belonging being a positive addition to the loneliness or alienation lived by those going through the separation and divorce process. Beside this ambiance, I feel most importantly the groups were a place in which one could develop a public version of one's divorce experience.

These small groups are a well-nigh perfect place to construct and modify one's story in public, with a stage (the group's meeting place), audience (the group members) and props (the groups surroundings) (Goffman, 1969). As one perfects the performance an "account" is developed, in the sense of a narrative that, while not excusing behaviour, detracts from its negative aspects and at the same time validates the teller. In these ways the teller maintains or creates meaning (Lyman and Scott, 1970). While Lyman and Scott have theorised this process, I saw my informants live this process as they developed their accounts inside these groups.

Often my informants gave a clear account of the story of their marriage to the group, even when sharing it for the first time. However, sometimes the story was somewhat less developed, at least initially. When one does not have a clear reason to give for the marriage breakdown, it may be hard to develop an account, one suitable both for oneself and for one's audiences (the wider society). The following account is a good

example of this: it was developed over a time period that spanned from the first time I met the informant in a group to the final interview I conducted with her in her home, and, in it we see that she had to work at building an acceptable account.

M's Account

M's first recounting of her marriage was to her support group, and one of the things she said was that her husband was not interested in working on their relationship any more. So this process (of developing an account) begins when she speaks for the first time on Feb. 25 1999, at the initial meeting of the support group:

I have the house and the dog . . . We gradually grew apart over time, and then we dated for a while and now he doesn't want to date anymore. . .

Somebody joked that she had "dog custody" and she smiled. In her first telling of a story she gives only the information that she has the house and the dog. This is not really an account as yet, in that the action (of separation) is not explained and the negative qualities associated with it are not discounted. The version is not yet ready. If Lyman and Scott are correct, something more needs to be provided in that little information has been given and the account needs to be developed from the initial statements. In subsequent meetings we might expect M's story to take on more of the characteristics of an account as she gets repeated opportunities to tell her story. She also needed to hear the stories of others in order to hear versions of the same event. This helped her make her own story. The next time we came together as a group then, when it comes time to tell her story of her separation this is what she says, March 12, 1999: (from fieldnotes)

. . . we got married. After working for a while I got laid off and got a package, so we came to Ottawa and within a couple of months he got a job

and then I got a job. We bought a house. Then we started trying to have a child. It seemed like the next thing to do. We spent a year trying. It didn't happen. My sister was living with us. She has manic depression and I was concerned about her. Then I got worried about passing on my sister's manic depression to the baby and my own illness . . . I didn't want it to be carried on. At the same time I was getting attracted to someone at work and later I found out so was he. I know that doesn't happen unless there is something really wrong.

Later I found out that at that time he saw a counsellor and she told him to leave the relationship . . . I told him at the time, we don't do the fun things we used to do together. Why don't we just stop trying to have a baby? I got checked out around that time and then so did he and it turned out that I was fine but . . . it turned out that his sperm count wasn't good. It wasn't me. Then a few days later he said he was going to leave. So he went. I decided to let him go. Then a few days later he came back. Then we decided not to live together but just keep seeing one another, like dating. So we did that for a while. Then a little while ago he said he didn't want to date anymore.

However, she knows she is not happy with the account she just gave to the group and so at the end of it she adds, *"I don't know whether I want him back or the marriage. I'm confused."* In other words as yet there is no sense of closure from the act of giving her account.

Although she has given the most thorough account she has at this time she knows that there is no real justification of her role in the account. Even though she is telling a fuller story than the account she has so far prepared she knows she still has to add to it. This is what she continues to work on. In the group she was able to rehearse and tell what story she had until finally she had something adequate that she could tell.

In the following meeting on April 12 1999, she talks of decorating her house and how she misses her husband. Then she adds, *"I would just say it was a shame something didn't work out. I never said it was his fault or anything."* So here in this addition to her

story she develops the theme of fault. Again on May 30, 1999, she discusses her ex-husband's reluctance to come back to her and her reaction to this news:

*I had thought that I would have to decide whether to take him back . . . .
Now when people ask me why, what went wrong? I don't know what to tell
them. Nothing went wrong. I don't know what to say.*

In the group, a discussion followed this about what to tell people about one's separation and each person talked about what they told others about their divorce.

Then in the following meeting, on June 3, 1999, there is somewhat of a breakthrough as she verbalises her feeling to the group that, *"It's not him that I want. It's the marriage."* She is able to progress with her account. Although she still does not have the reason she wants, she has an account of her experience of marital dissolution. In the end it is not the husband (who has rejected her) that she wants but rather the marriage. She misses that status. In this way she can give some meaning to her experience of a seemingly senseless separation and divorce.

She thus had her account and she reflected on this process of account building in front of a sympathetic audience when I interviewed her on Sept 13, 1999. She described her process like this to me:

What I needed from the group and got, was other people's stories, people who were separating, because I don't know anyone else who has gone through this and none of my friends has separated so I had no one to identify with. I felt isolated, like I was the only person this was happening to, so I really needed to meet other people who also were going through separation.

First there was the necessity of being with others who shared her circumstances, in order to build an account. By seeking out a community who had a similar experience it was

possible to close the gap between the action and societal expectations. This choice of group (separated people) would change the range of expectations. The background expectations of those in the group contributed to the acceptance of her account. This worked in this way:

I just felt like I was too alone. I couldn't move through it, to bring me out of isolation and feel part of society, that (it) was a normal process, not something bizarre . . . I needed to talk about it and up to a certain point I hadn't told anyone. My two friends at work knew but nobody else knew. Neighbours didn't know X moved out . . .

M had kept her separation a secret from neighbours, co-workers and family. As a result she had no account and could not develop one. For all intents and purposes, the separation had not happened. By being with self-helpers she developed an account over time amongst her new speech community. She speaks of how she had felt about her separation:

Because I was ashamed that I had somehow failed to make the marriage work and knowing that other people had been through it (helped) . . . The group gave me the safety of talking, they talked about their experience. I felt I was normal.

The result of telling the group the account and having it accepted allowed her to become part of society again and feel “normal.” Her experience echoes Kennedy and Humphreys (1994) suggestion that “cure” is achieved through reorganising the meaning system and the event so the individual can make sense of it and move on. M’s original account of “dog custody” did not fit with cultural expectations (i.e. commitment, marriage for life and stability) nor did it dissociate her from her shame of being separated. She developed an account which she was able to use to dissociate herself from the negative qualities of being

separated.

Groups allow members to create a new sense of self. In their company an account can be fashioned, rather like a mask that one can gradually but skilfully build. Ebaugh (1988) speaks of this when she points out that once in the process of role-exiting, individuals begin to display signs or cues that a change has occurred. “These presentations of self or cues are like masks that indicate a specific role change” (Ebaugh, 1988:150). In the group the teller has the opportunity to try on a few interpretations with little commitment and low investment. At the same time they have an audience committed enough to watch their performance as they perfect it and get it just right, a fit between their experience and where they want to be next. The performance is in an ongoing process of being perfected until finally the account fits the teller’s needs. One of the results of having such an account is that the teller has made sense of her world again which of course is beneficial to mental health, which is the next theme we will examine.

Mental Health

The groups were called “lifesavers” at meetings and certainly from people’s stories this can be seen to be metaphorically, even literally true. Some felt that without the group they would have had much worse mental health outcomes post-divorce. For example one informant said of a member of her buddy group:

I thought we would lose a man, but the support group saved his life . . . He had been abusive in the marriage and he nearly didn't make it. (He was) coming to grips with the guilt. They'd call a meeting for him. He'd go and they'd talk him down.

The man in this account had been suicidal and this group were sufficiently committed to

their sense of community to come together when he was contemplating suicide, in order to *“talk him down.”*

That the problems accompanying the divorce experience were sometimes serious was reiterated over and over during the fieldwork. However, I found the public perception of the divorce process to be generally unsympathetic. For example, patrons of the bar where one of the support groups met were not impressed by the upheavals of divorce. They complained about the group while I waited for group members. A woman divorced after thirty-five years of marriage also spoke of such perceptions:

Sometimes you get comments from someone, it's been long enough, you should be okay and you shouldn't be feeling this way.

Yet another woman talks about her “darkness” after a thirty year marriage ending, but in her case the inappropriate response from neighbours and co-workers was not derision, but pity. She felt that pity was not what she needed. The practical help offered in these groups was what she needed, and part of that was the educational role self-help could play.

This education is sometimes of a reflexive sort, rather like having a mirror held up for one. This reflected back to the person the efficacy of their performance. A woman in her fifties talks of her actions in her support group. By participating she came to see herself in new ways. She said it was:

... hard to face that I wasn't perfect. I thought I was doing the perfect thing what you should do and all the time it was control and dependence.

For her, the feedback of being with others was an important benefit. For another informant it was part of who she was to need to have a form of self-reflection and she

describes the group helping her:

I guess the one thing the support group gave me was (help) to define who I am. It gave me a safe net to try and discover who I was: the real crisis of who I was. I couldn't make decisions for myself . . . I didn't want to put my children in a surrogate spousal role. I needed another adult . . . (then) I could talk things out and . . . make a decision. I can't think it out without talking about it. I have friends who are the same way. It's a way people have of working through things.

For this informant talking things through allowed her to understand herself.

Then there were others who due to the stress of the divorce experience needed to have their sense of self reflected back to them via others. After a particularly difficult divorce experience a female informant said that:

I needed to be reassured that I was lovable, that I am worthwhile, even though internally I knew that. I realized that I needed to hear it from outside because of the separation . . .

These self-helpers needed to hear reassurance from others. George Herbert Mead (1962) has theorized what I saw happening in the support groups. He tells us the self can only come into existence through social interaction, through listening and internalising the reactions of others. He describes this process as follows, "He becomes a self in so far as he can take the attitude of another and act toward himself as others act." (Mead, G. H., 1962:171). As the informant describes above, this is what she needed as she recovers from her feelings about herself after separation. The others in the group are able to give rise to a new sense of self for this woman. It is this sense of generalised other (the group) which gives the person their "unity of self" (Mead, G. H., 1962:154).

It seems that as part of the divorce process, as with any major change of status, there is a necessary letting go of previous status and a welcoming of the new status, if that

is possible. This can be aided through socialising with others with a similar status. At this crucial time, this is part of what self-groups do. My data suggests that this is what is happening in these groups and my findings add to the literature in that previous work on self-help concludes it to be most effective after a stress event (Ramsay, 1992).

Re-Socialisation

Another key element of what self-help groups provide is re-socialisation back into society as a fully functioning member. For some people who experience separation and divorce, there is no-one else they know who is separated and divorced, as was the case with M. This can result in social isolation if they believe that they are the only person in this situation. This radical alienation from society is stressful: it is a cessation of the kind of societal interactions the individual has known thus far.

One female informant who had been bewildered by her experience of the divorce process outlined quite clearly how this experience impacted her. Through her support group her new sense of self as an ex was discovered and played out for her with others in the same situation. She thus came to know that what she needed at that time in order to continue as an individual in her own right was, "*To bring (myself) out of isolation.*" The group was able to make her feel part of society again by being with friends. As a result of her separation she says "*I did feel like I was strange, like I didn't belong. Odd.*" The lack of belonging came with her loss of role but through sitting with similar others she was able to build a new sense of self.

This process of surrendering the old role and building a new one can be aided in many ways and self-helpers were adept at doing this by talking with other members who

had similar experiences. Ideally this is a transitional state and individuals do find new roles that are not part of a “hangover identity” (Ebaugh, 1988). This ability to talk to others gives people in need the opportunity to obtain support that would be otherwise difficult to find. One woman talked of the letters she received from her ex that she was able to share with members of her group who had had similar experiences. Another member of the same group would also receive letters from her ex-spouse. The informant describes the letters:

I mean really they are incredible, three pagers. They are all full of what a total shit I am. Those things can be really devastating, so I save them up. If I have to wait a week and a half, then the other person reads them (to the group) and we all laugh. I laugh, she laughs. It sort of puts things in perspective.

Being in a group, this woman was able to put into perspective an otherwise difficult experience in her life, that of getting offensive letters that laid the blame on her for divorce. In this case there was even someone in the group having the same experience and so the women could laugh about it together.

Some informants said that this kind of support could not be expected from their families. They explained that they could not tell their family what they were able to tell their support group. Others were afraid of boring their family and friends and had to find people to turn to so they did not wear their family out. For example, abuse was not something people necessarily felt free to discuss with family and yet they needed to speak of it. It was in the safety of the group that they were able to do so.

Informants spoke of the value of talking to others who have no stake in one's situation. As well informants spoke of the benefits of talking and having an audience. The

talking cure, the value of getting it off one's chest was mentioned, and this does seem to be one of the tenets of the self-help model of cure.

Another way in which support groups helped was in creating new friendships. Here one group member talks of the camping trips members took together, "*Our little group of twelve plus children came, that was about thirty people, with kids. We were all very lonely.*" For this woman a mother of four teenagers at the time, the companionship that the support group offered was very important. Another woman acknowledges the problem associated with the change in status from being a couple to being a single person and said there was a change in friends that came with it. A young man adds, "*Most of the things I did were with my wife.*" These people found that their support groups could fill the void left by the loss of their partners and their couple friends.

Another value of the support group is that of helping others. The value of helper therapy cannot be underestimated in these cases and is perhaps little recognised as part of healing. Informants know that, "*. . . (with) new people, the older ones can help the new ones.*" This parallels the role of sponsors in AA in that seniority and authority is recognised within the group and furthermore is used to resocialise new members. The above informant had been very active in organising for her group and thus had had the opportunity to see these dynamics at work. A more complex dynamic of this is the value of seeing others who may be worse off than oneself: this was mentioned on more than one occasion. In some ways this was a comfort because one could appreciate the advantages that one did have. This ability to cast a bad situation in a more positive light was reiterated by one facilitator that I met. She had the healthiest approach I found to self-

help and she had definitely lived her material in her personal life. She points out first of all the possibility that some people do not change:

Some live in the past, closing the door of the future. Some like it this way. It justifies their life. If you say you can't be happy, it's a choice you make. For some people, they have a child that dies, traumatic events happen. This is not paradise. You are not the only one. You can change your past. You can mourn and grieve and heal yourself. I think it's too bad that after fifteen years they have not made that process.

Having acknowledged the trauma, she says the way to change is to believe that *"You can be happy again. You have to want to."* So she works for those who want to change through the mechanism of self-help. This belief in change and working towards it is one of the prime moving forces that I heard from self-help leaders.

Family as Metaphor

Individuals were often grateful for the companionship that the group had given them over the months and in some cases, years. These results were stretched along the continuum of intensity from an educational experience to a new kind of family, as described by informants. What people received from the groups depended on the individual's life experience up to that point and the experiences of those they found themselves with. Of course this was very much the luck of the draw whether one landed in a group that suited one's personality, needs and age at the time of the divorce. When the match was good, there were beneficial results. Some were fortunate enough to join a group where the other members had children the same age as theirs. Deep friendships resulted from some of these coincidences.

There is one final one way in which self-help provides benefit and this one is in my

opinion the most fundamental. Informants say they experience family in their support groups and I would suggest that this is an experience of family as metaphor. There are intimate, supportive relationships, like idealised family, such that the individual can then continue to function while under stress. This is especially true when the kinship system is not providing what is needed. Self-help provides a pool of individuals to draw on when one does not have enough support from family or biological kin. As well one may be lacking in resources as divorce breaks one's former social network. These lacks create the need for a new use of the notion of family.

One female informant speaks of how her experience of self-help moved from one of being friends to one of being family:

There were twelve of us. We started (meeting) every other week. We all had our children the same weeks, so we thought we could do things with our kids. I brought together ten families with children. We had this amazing time. Suddenly it was like an extended family. For the next three years they were my family.

So for this informant, her self-help group became a family during the period of divorce. Of course, one's biological family is not always able to provide what one needs. The individual may know what they would like family to be and yet be unable to access this through their own biological family. The group is then able to meet those needs, functioning like family:

You know people say that this is what my family should be like . . . you really are loved and respected for yourself and you don't have to have a facade or a face on.

This male informant put it rather well:

It really is kinda like a cross between what you need your family to be like

and therapy . . . it gives you a kinda home in a way.

Family as an idea does not die despite divorce. It is a robust notion even when it is used in its metaphorical sense. Support when it is given is recognised as a family-like atmosphere. Thus we continue with the idea of family as we wish it could be, despite experience to the contrary. It is one of the “myths” that transcend commonsense understandings (Barthes, 1972).

So this is how we may theorise self-help as working. Ready made there is an audience, and the time to rehearse until one gets one’s performance just right (Goffman, 1969). Of course at the same time, others are waiting in the wings to rehearse their performance for one’s benefit too. In this way the transition into and out of the ex role is made easier. Talking with others who have had the same experience, one creates an account and strengthens the performance that one is going to give. This gives more focus, more finish to the final performance. However, this may not be a performance that one’s friends and family are going to enjoy.

Making friends through the group enables one to replace the social network that has been lost through the divorce process. At the same time helping others is a profound mechanism for change that further reinforces the role change. The factor of others worse off than oneself may be a spur to further rehearse one’s new role so that the performance improves over time. Finally, self-help may in fact fill in many losses in the disrupted or damaged kin structure that result from separation and divorce, at least in a temporary fashion, by providing needed resources and support to individuals sharing a common need. At the same time the notion of family is kept alive in the groups.

Chapter Six

Conclusions

How do you have the good without the bad? I don't know. I wish there was a formula. Instead of having to go through the pain . . . . Before there was no me and the best thing for me was a divorce.

One person's good, one's bad. One wins, one loses . . . I've always said to people going through this, try to resolve it out of court . . . . My friends . . . they had ex-husbands who were very manipulative and pit the kids against you. It got worse. After the separation I thought this would be better. It wasn't. I was still . . . emotionally engaged and had to learn to disengage.

The Ripple Effect

In this concluding chapter I will first deal with the aftermath of divorce with reference to long term effects and then I will deal with wider conclusions that I draw from the data. Beyond my initial agenda of interest in the membership of self-help, its benefits and the emotional outcomes of divorce, I also discovered a ripple effect post-divorce for individuals and families created after separation. The set of conclusions in this chapter are not a summary of what has been learned from the research but rather an application of the understandings that may be drawn from the research. Thus there are two parts that follow in these general conclusions: one is the long term outcomes post-divorce for families and the other deals with self-help groups, the ways in which such approaches have wider applications and implications for relationships.

First however, I will discuss the impact on family structures post-divorce. I will again be relying both on my informants' stories, as well as the insights of theorists. If one does remarry or make a new relationship post divorce this can include other families who

become part of a “recombined” family (Cockett, 1994). As Ephron (1986) says:

The extended family is in our lives again. This should make all the people happy who were complaining back in the sixties and seventies that the reason family life was so hard, especially on mothers, was that the nuclear family had replaced the extended family . . . Your basic extended family today includes your ex-husband or -wife, your ex's new mate, your new mate, possibly your new mate's ex, and any new mate that your new mate's ex has acquired. It consists entirely of people who are not related by blood, many of whom can't stand each other. This return of the extended family reminds me of the favorite saying of my friend's extremely pessimistic mother: Be careful what you wish for, you might get it.

This situation where series of families are joining together in entirely new ways gives rise to “divorce chains” (Bohannon, 1968). These are new situations for family members, the complexities of which may unfold as issues post-divorce with custody and access and support develop, possibly taking years to play out.

A variety of processes occur post-divorce for the individual who eventually enters a new relationship. The “psychic” divorce, one of Bohannon's six stations (1968) discussed in the first chapter, first needs to be achieved so that the loss of meaning that accompanies the act of separation from the former spouse can be resolved. Frequently companionship can no longer be found in the usual set of circumstances or amongst the same set of friends, and the individual must draw on his or her own social and psychological resources. This transition can be made in a variety of ways, only one of which is to participate in self-help groups. Part of this transition may be a re-involvement in relationships, after initially being uninterested in relationships post divorce..

Once an individual enters into a new relationship or a remarriage, then a new entity may come into being -- that of the step-family. From my informants I heard accounts of

the arrangements that were entered into once they began to adjust to their post-divorce status. These accounts are interesting in that they paint a picture of a life that does not go back to what it was before, even with remarriage and the founding of another family. Despite hopes for a happy ending following divorce there is a ripple effect. By this I mean that once the relationships are changed not only are they altered forever, this seems to have a domino effect on other relationships as well. New relationships are part of this effect as they are contracted in a more unstable condition and this fluidity keeps the life of parents and family members in flux.

One of the issues that arises when one analyses these new families or “step-families” is the lack of boundaries. Unlike a nuclear family created by marriage where it is quite clear who is part of the family and who is not, for step-families membership is not so obvious. For example when parents form new relationships children may become part of two families not one and for them the family boundaries become quite permeable. At the same time there is a lack of legal coherence in the rights and obligations of “step-parents” (Weitzman, 1974).

Roles, norms and rituals are provided explicitly and implicitly for an original nuclear family at marriage. Biological families have a relatively narrowed range of choices and as a result there is less to disagree about, whereas for other kinds of families such as step families, members must work out their own solutions and there is more room for dissension and disagreement (Ishii-Kuntz and Coltrane, 1992). It can be unclear how to proceed for children, adolescents and new adults who are part of the arrangement. For example, when the term step-child or step-parent is only weakly attributable (where there

is already a biological parent, other biological children or where children have more than one residence) then it may be impossible to create parenting roles between the children and parents involved. With no clear guidelines, there is a lack of clarity and thus confusion may arise. There is a gap between expectations and behaviour for both children and adults.

On the basis of the variety of family forms that I have found in my sample of respondents, it seems reasonable to suggest that the term “step-family” may be inadequate to cover the varieties of families post-divorce. Recombinant family is perhaps a better generic term, and it better covers the element of children rotating between households. From my own fieldwork, of the twenty interviewees, seven had either no children or had adult children who were no longer in the home, eight had children whose permanent residence was with them, that is to say, either they did not see the other biological parent at all or seldom saw that parent, and five interviewees had children rotating from one household to another regularly. This rotation of the children between households creates a real problem of definition, as it is not clear just what the family composition is. For my purposes if they are included in an arrangement that involved being part of more than one household I categorized these children as having rotating household memberships.

Among my informants then I have identified four types of families. I would not call these “step-families” as this pre-supposes remarriage and only one of these families is part of a remarriage. These four types are: a blended family where two parts of previously existent families complete with a parent and children come together (case A), a theoretically blended family, where there are two parents involved from previous family

arrangements but for one reason or another the children are not part of the arrangement (case B), a blended family limited by custody arrangement—two families are joined together but are limited by the custody arrangements of children with respect to the child's other biological parent (case C) and a blended family that has some children in sole and some in joint custody arrangements because these children are the product of more than one union and are thus subject to custody arrangements with two different fathers (case D).

Among my informants is a father (case A) who now lives in a blended family unit with biological children who rotate households;

. . . we separated having the kids half the time with each of us . . . I got involved with a woman who was also a single parent and our family structure has started to appear to be something like a blended family.

However this blended family cannot be understood to be coterminous with household.

Then there was a family, sanctioned by marriage and theoretically a blended family (case B) that did not exist in actuality due to the respective ages of the children involved. By the time the remarriage occurred both partners no longer had dependent children who lived at home.

As well there is the limited blended family (case C), limited that is to the custody arrangements that exist on the part of both partners involved;

. . . we have lived common law. He's also divorced, so our family now consists of five children, age range is thirteen to seven . . . He has two boys, thirteen and eleven, I have three children, one almost thirteen, one will be ten in May and one is 7 and a half . . . He had joint custody now they're living with their Mum. I had joint custody and we were sharing almost fifty/fifty.

Though initially both parents had joint custody neither partner has custody of their children at this point in time and in fact their former partners now have sole custody agreements regarding their children. However, the couple think and behave as a family and do things with their children as a unit. So, although this may not be a legal entity as a family, it is a social entity for the children and partners involved.

Finally there is the single-parent family situation (case D) where the children involved have different fathers and thus the children are involved in distinct custody situations. The mother speaks about the family arrangement:

The younger one goes to her father every other week for a week, like she's not here right now. One week on, one week off. The sixteen year old and I are here together all the time.

So the siblings' custody arrangements are different and the children are part of two distinct families.

In these recombinant families then, the needs of all members involved may not necessarily be met and in fact the needs of some members may conflict with those of others. I am thinking here of the differing needs of adolescents as opposed to young children and siblings who are in separate custody arrangements. This is one of the major adjustments that post-divorce families must make, that is to the fluidity of the new family structures. While recombining families is a complex task, beset by parental disagreements over everything from where the children will live to who pays for what, the legal process by which many of these issues gets sorted out itself contributes to the complexity and difficulty of these issues.

Legal Issues and Divorce

She was very litigious, very contentious she wanted to fight all the time. She wanted me to pay for her living expenses and support. She didn't want the kids, she wanted money. So she fought for seven years. On public support. It cost everything. We lost our house, any investments I'd ever made. Anything we'd ever owned. I got the kids.

Legal issues around divorce structure both our definitions of family as well as how family property is to be shared. Most societies have only two main occasions at which family property leaves the individual and is transferred to another or others. (Weitzman, 1985:xvi). While there are other occasions at which wealth is transferred such as the creation of a trust for one's dependents, it is clear that with the rise of divorce, we can make a major addition to these two wealth transferral points, and that is divorce settlements. What is new and different about this is that the rules that govern property for marriage and inheritance are on the whole old and relatively unchanged, whereas the rules for transference of wealth at divorce are new. Added to this is the fact that the amount of money that changes hands has substantially increased:

Inflation has meant that a lot more divorces involve property of far greater face value . . . the same house is now worth more than \$150,000, far more than many industrial claims or tort actions.(Bohannon, 1985; 21).

Furthermore these laws are in a constant state of flux. For example in Canada, the recent attempt to change the custody and access laws foundered in the mire of presentations from both men's and women's groups, until the proposed legislation was tabled for three years. These were political advocacy groups that represented opposing viewpoints on the proposed legislation. All of which would seem to suggest that there may be a lack of clarity as to which priorities will prevail in our culture at this juncture. As Weitzman

(1985:xvi) says:

We are uncertain about which rules are fair and we are still unsure about what rules foster the types of family roles and commitments our society wants to encourage.

This lack of confidence in which rules to embody in law about property that is transferred at divorce impacts how family is constructed.

The amount of money that is now transferred at divorce in the U.S. is equal to that which is transferred by will or intestate (Weitzman, 1985:xvii). As well as the amounts that are transferred from one party to another, there are also the large sums of money that need to be paid out for services that facilitate that transfer. In essence large amounts of money are released into the economy. These sums go to professionals such as lawyers, real estate agents, social workers and counselors who in large part aid the couple in the process of divorce and are able to collect fees from clients whose assets have been recently liquidated (Bohannon, 1985:15). One informant who did political advocacy work for women told me that a great deal of money was made by professionals in these transfers and that this industry had major economic effects. This wealth transfer has no historical precedent and as such provides new opportunities for investment, profit and loss.

Aside from the cost of divorce, there is also the possibility of costs being incurred even after the divorce is finalised, usually due to disagreements over custody and support. Custody battles do occur and are a drain on family resources and emotions, at a time when energy is needed for new beginnings. Joint custody is a popular ideal at this point in time but it cannot work in all cases, especially when partners will not co-operate on their co-parenting issues. I heard about this in one informant's account of her legal battle with her

ex-husband for custody of their three children;

At one point I was fighting for sole custody because joint custody wasn't working. I thought joint custody only works if two people can agree but my ex-husband didn't agree to T (her daughter) going to a counsellor when she was in need of help. I thought he's not looking after her best interests . . . .

So that there was a lot of professionals involved with the children, social workers, it ended up the children were appointed an Official Guardian, that didn't work out very well . . . the children became very upset over all these strangers coming into their lives. Asking what happens when you are with Mummy, what do you do? What happens with Daddy? They felt like their whole life was an open book and they didn't like it.

Although the issues here were with one child, the adolescent daughter, still all three children became part of a lengthy legal processes. These are slow and costly and even when finally resolved often do not fulfill the needs of the protagonists and in the process can harm the children. As this informant says, the children “*saw Mummy and Daddy are into this power struggle.*” These power struggles may be derived from beliefs about one's right to direct one's own future.

From this example we can see that if two players emphasize their rights to autonomy post-divorce then there may be power struggles between the parents or between the parents and the State. Coleman and Ganong (1992) argue that individualism is having a major impact. As they describe it, struggles based on individualism tend to have no winners and have a lose-lose quality to them. Legal battles over money may have more to do with who has the right to make decisions. There is the notion that post-divorce one has a right to autonomy (this is even written into separation agreements as standard language). However the reality is that post-divorce with the setting up of the two

households, they are intimately related to one another, often forcibly so in the area of family economics. Even with remarriage the ties remain between the two houses with demands from one household being made on the other. Yet this reality runs directly counter to the strong cultural theme of individualism, often with contentious results for the families. Children are negatively impacted by family conflict and for Guttman (1993) this effect gives rise to more negative outcomes for children than either changes in socio-economic status or the change from a nuclear family to a single parent family.

Among the financial issues that continue for years past the divorce is the issue of non-payment of support orders. Case #2 (chapter III), a single parent, is an example of non-payment. She has an ex-spouse who does not provide her with his address and cannot be found. Pask suggests that there is too much leniency in the system, as child support orders are allowed to go into default (Pask, 1993:338). The cost of chasing non-compliers is prohibitive. There is evidently no relationship between visitation and compliance with court orders (Weitzman, 1985:297). Areas where cheques are paid into court and which use a system of incarceration have the highest rate of compliance (Weitzman, 1985:298). For Australia the solution to this situation was to create a Child Support Agency as part of the Australian Taxation Office. Support payments are deposited there or are taken at wages source and the agency sends the payment to the supporting parent (Eichler, 1997).

After the completion of the study new information emerged about the measures for dealing with non-payers being put in place in Ontario. Since the May 1, 1997 amendments to the Divorce Act, support has been calculated according to a set of guidelines that are in

essence a table for support based on the number of children and the non-custodial parent's income. The payer's income is estimated according to previous tax returns. Now in Ontario, the enforcement of these guidelines is encouraged by the suspension of driver's licenses, suspension of motor vehicle registration and the notification of non-payment to credit bureaus for defaulters (Colman, 1998). The Family Responsibility Office has chosen three collection agencies to handle collections after six months of arrears. Income tax and G.S.T. refunds are also garnisheed. These are all relatively new measures that are intended to enforce the payment of support post-divorce. Federally these issues however may be revisited in 2002 when the Minister of Justice reports to Parliament on the child support guidelines of 1997. In preparation for this report the Canadian Bar Association is recommending that judges should have the right to remedy denial of access and legislate parental responsibilities including teaching respect for the other parent.

We see that post-divorce there is a range of issues. There is a ripple effect on family relationships and one of the issues may be how these effects can play out due to custody and access. Related to this are the issues around finances that may have existed for the family prior to divorce, but which reappear in another more costly guise – that of court costs and legal fees. For most families who must establish two homes after divorce this is money that can ill be afforded and the peace that is so necessary to the remaking of a home is further disturbed.

Though many of these issues cannot be dealt with on the micro level of the self-help groups but rather need other solutions, still the support that individuals find within groups can address some of these issues some of the time. This is true when it comes to

negative ripple effects, because support is provided for enduring difficult times. In the next section I will discuss ways that self-help is adaptive at the micro level over the short term.

On Relationships

Stresses are not unique to modern industrial societies but exist in small scale societies as can be seen from the literature on underdevelopment (Wayne, 1975) and culture dispersal (Nagel, Snipp, 1991, Agarwal, 1990). These studies demonstrate that being able to deal with the stress is key to survival. Self-help is a particular form of adaptation suited to a society with individualistic tendencies and a dislike for professionals. In small scale cultures, there is a relationship between kinship (in this case non-nuclear families) and other organisations that offer support (Lowie, 1966)(Service, 1965).

The kinship system may vary from culture to culture and with it are variations in the cultural beliefs and consequently expectations of what marriage supplies. What may be considered serious in one culture with respect to marital problems may not be considered a problem elsewhere. For example in some cultures respect (not romantic love) is what is to be expected in a marriage. According to Craib (1994:113), it is particularly hard on relationships when partners are in a constant state of self-reconstruction. When two individuals come together who are developing themselves, the primary goal will be self-development and the relationship will not necessarily be guaranteed by a traditional vow, kinship ties or a legal marriage. This type of love and relationship based on change of self and instability can be construed as conducive to a modern way of life in that the flexibility of self facilitates career moves and changes in job skills. This creates a work force that is pliable rather than rooted to a geographic place. It

is easier to achieve job changes if one is not attached to other persons. In other words one can make an ideology out of being able to change, but this ideology will also undermine connections to others.

This argument can be pressed one stage further in that not only may individual partners be developing self with their own ends in mind, but the relationship itself may be used as a vehicle for self-development. Thus when the desired or expected development does not occur the relationship is likely to become expendable because it is no longer serving its function. Thus the search may begin for another relationship that serves the needs of one who is seeking self-development. This type of relationship, one that is independent of kin ties, has been termed the “pure relationship” (Giddens, 1992). In this view, dependents, even children, may contribute to a slowing down or “inertial drag” on the self (Craib, 1994).

It is not unusual for older generations to talk about the self in terms of family. Yet now it is family that is dismembered in the process of developing the self, in that the self is sometimes born by breaking free from family. We can ask for what are we developing the self of the self-help world? For whom? (Bellah, 1985). Hillman (1996) described this as the shrinking of our culture until all that is left is subjectivity. Family is often viewed negatively and yet at the same time there is intense nostalgia for the sense of family. Are we, as a result of a strong tradition of individualism producing a way of life that is neither individually nor socially viable? Even while we long for the security of traditional forms, we may resent those very forms that provide security. Yet the longing for belonging continues. So we come full circle, from individual needs to need for community and that is

the impasse (Bellah, 1985).

Marriage was once the fundamental building block of the kinship system that was designed to care for all culture members. This transformation in values is causing changes in kinship structures and subsequently, in needs provision, (the care of both the very young and the elderly). We need to ask questions like, who suffers because of the myths of romantic love and family that become a naturalised part of social reality as discussed in chapter I (Barthes, 1972)? Is it the children, participants in relationships or the fabric of society? There are members of the kinship structures who are conspicuously absent from these myths and they are specifically the children and the elderly as well as their caretaking needs.

At the same time, there are some large social forces at work here, not least of which is the economic climate of our times. While this emphasis on human potential is contributing to the disintegration of families, at the same time governments are dismantling the trappings of the welfare state, on the assumption that the “family” or kinship structure will be there to pick up the pieces. However, while they were looking the other way, the “family” has exited by the back door, so to speak, so there may be no picking up the pieces for certain families. Where are the resources to come from to care for everyone? It is well known that there are not enough informal care givers (Willmott, 1986, Mckie, 1993a). There have been some assumptions within the welfare state about care and unfortunately those assumptions cannot always be met. For case #2, (Chapter III) a single parent struggles to bring up her disabled child alone, without support and with a non-cooperative ex-spouse. She is trapped in a system that does not want responsibility

for her and her dependent child and yet neither does her ex-husband. She also has few kin in this country as she is a first generation Canadian. She is in a nowhere land between state and kin, where post-divorce families at risk may go.

Professional care was built in as part of a welfare state on the belief that care would continue to be provided. However, this was built on the assumption that the GNP would grow gradually in order to allow a percentage to be invested in human services (Bender, 1986). This is the kind of care for which there is no charge. Care does exist but increasingly it is the kind that one must pay for. There are changes occurring in the ability to provide human services and the whole caring\healing industry is under stress. This is another factor impacting families in transition.

Having set the context with a critique of our cultural expectations around relationships, coupled at the same time with a larger social context of government disengagement from care and care-giving issues, I would like to suggest some of the ways in which self-help sometimes addresses these dual lacks and thus can be a short term adaptive response. It is my finding that as a result of these pressures, these lacks of support, that people are resorting to finding their own support. This is not surprising really. If the government is backing away while refusing to see that family is being dismantled, then individuals must find their own resources among others like themselves. Willmott (1986) and Berger (1977) discuss social networks as a kind of mediating structure between the nuclear family and the larger institutions in the public arena. Thus one finds a grass roots movement that does not require funding, nor does it need to be run by professionals or a larger institution. This of course suits a climate where services are

downloaded from government to the community. The leaders of these groups are those in the same situation as their group members but perhaps have more experience and thus are, in a sense, self-made professionals. Self-help arguably fills some of the gaps that are appearing at the macro level in the statutory provision and thus it can be said to be adaptive, adaptive for those using it who are so impacted. Qualifying this however, it is clear that self-help is not the type of route that is suitable or is chosen by all people all the time but rather fulfills the needs of a particular population post-divorce. Also we need to ask whether over the years can bonds made in self-help be maintained through frailty and old age? What is at stake is not just relationships but the caretaking of the young and old (Bly, 1996). Will the bond of self-help be maintained long term and most of all in financial need? There are limitations to the kind of caretaking self-help can provide as compared to the long term commitments of kin.

In order to elaborate my argument that self-help is short term adaptive response for people impacted by these macro level dynamics, I will develop the idea that there is a particular kind of relationship between self-help and the family and that the model for this relationship is to be found in anthropological theory, in that self-help is a kind of latter day common interest association.

Common Interest Associations

According to anthropological theory, common interest associations provide for the kin structure when it is having trouble. They are like “a way station between family and state,” (Hammond, 1971) as they help people manage societal transitions. Survival of the kin system, in other words, is facilitated through adaptation during social change (Kerri et

al, 1976). The common interest association is just another place to call on people and one of the ways one can make linkages is through quasi-kin (or fictive) kin networks.

In small scale cultures these common interest associations may serve specific needs such as a focus on making items, preparing for war, joining together for credit, or perhaps just a men's or a women's association (Hammond, 1971). They are another pool of people to be called on to deal with specific situations. For example one of the functions of the *coffs*, (Bourdieu, 1961) an Algerian form of common interest group, was to make sure one had enough people on one's side in the event of a quarrel. Another common interest association, the *arisan* is a rotating credit association that provides credit to its pool of members in turn as and when they need capital (Geertz, 1962). These are examples for small-scale societies, however, it is not just to other societies we can turn for models of co-operation that fill in gaps in what kinship structures normally provide, but also to our own history.

The seeds of common interest ventures in the West similar to self-help are to be found in late medieval guilds and religious orders. During the Industrial Revolution the trade union movement spawned new types of organizations such as "friendly societies" to provide poor relief (Wuthnow, 1994:71). One could also theorize the latter day self-help groups as continuous in this line of development from previous forms of association. Self-help is here at this time because as a result of lack of support people are finding their own solutions. The filling of kinship needs and the finding of one's own answers with one's own resources is reminiscent of the creativity of non-industrial societies and the same creativity is seen historically.

Family Again

As a result of divorce family is changing rapidly yet this is a social form that has been with us a long time. In order to be creative with solutions it has been necessary to find new forms of social structure yet the expectations associated with family continue and are not abandoned. A new kind of kin, quasi-kin is formed in the crucible of change -- the self-help movement. It provides a pool of individuals, the motivation, and the relationships to fill the gaps that exist in currently inadequate kin structures. People may be opting out of the system altogether and finding relationships that are alternative sources when support is needed. Yet family remains as metaphor transposed to the self-help group.

According to Margaret Mead (1970), we may have a kinship system that does not work, whose ideals flagrantly conflict with practice. However, perhaps the facility for small groups gives some flexibility and in this respect, North Americans do well in that the self-help movement is extensive. In the same way that in a small scale culture, one may call on one's fellows for aid, to get trade in the market (Kerri, 1976), or when a quarrel threatens. (Bourdieu, 1961), we may be in the process of similarly calling on others at the point of divorce through the use of self-help groups and I would suggest it is adaptive in the short term to do so. However, these groups are for a specific situation at a specific point in time and certainly do not replace kin structures.

On Self-help

Having argued that self-help is a short term adaptive response to the impact of social forces such as individualism and the down-sizing of government support, I want to

argue that it is also adaptive in the face of personal issues. However, here I will use both theory and my informant's voices to suggest that self-help is a micro-adaptive mechanism. Having used anthropological theory at the macro level for self-help groups and feminist theory with respect to the nature of social life within the family, at the micro level I have used Symbolic Interactionist theory to gain insight into the construction of accounts that occurs within self help groups. The insight that our own behaviour comes from how others respond to us and contributes in large part to how we think about ourselves is derived from Cooley (1956), one of the fathers of modern Symbolic Interactionism. Cooley's "looking glass self" (Cooley, 1956: 184) encapsulates the sense in which we interpret ourselves and derive our sense of self from how others react to us. Most important of all, this is a lifelong process as we continually work to change self. The latter theoretical insights were necessary to understanding the internal workings of the self-help group as I went about the research interviewing individuals and participating in these groups.

As I look over all I learned through my informants, I prefer firstly for the findings to be grounded in informants' understandings of this process. Moving from the group to the individual my findings can be focussed on each person that I spoke to in the field, using a Symbolic Interactionist understanding of accounts to deepen these findings. I want to include some of what seems to me to be their key words and how an appreciation of accounts fleshes out our understanding of the reality they convey as well as illustrating the micro adaptivity of self-help groups. It seems that divorce is causing suffering: the loss so caused is well expressed by the female informant who said *"I have to belong*

somewhere.” She of course speaks to us all for we all need to belong somewhere. If we have no family to be part of then being creative creatures, we will find other places to join in, such as a group of people like ourselves.

Once my informants were in their support groups some profound dynamics took place. Individuals can remake their life story through the creation of accounts which place them centre stage in their narrative. They can absolve themselves of guilt associated with their behaviour whether the guilt is appropriate or not, and develop an account at the same time. The breaking of family can take away one’s identity, thus in order to recover, new meaning has to be found. This I feel is what happens through the “telling of stories” at the groups and the weekly meetings that subsequently refine the story through mechanisms such as “check-in.” These all take place in a non-judgmental speech community. The background assumptions of this community are that relationships are far from simple and life has to go on and thus they support the making of a viable account. A speech community is created over time and with repetition an account is made that is accepted by the community. The hearers in the constituency have the same background expectations which contribute to the account’s acceptance and at the same time the style of speech is perfected until “acceptable utterances” are achieved (Lyman and Scott, 1970:14). As far as the adequacy of the accounts heard in groups goes, what makes a satisfying account is the acceptability of the account for the group and if there is no change made to an account once developed, then I have concluded for the purposes of this work that it must ultimately have fulfilled its purpose in the eyes of the group members. Overall, there was no evidence of non-legitimation of accounts. In other words there was no direct

challenging of accounts, rather a borrowing from the general form presented at group meetings and the creation of a standard form for accounts.

Having created an account within the group, this is the place to play one's role to an audience par excellence, and through the account unwanted material about self and previous acts can be kept thoroughly backstage (Goffman, 1969). Thus the groups aid the necessary acceptance of the loss of the marriage and the role of ex-spouse (regardless of whether one is the "leaver" or the "left") and the moving on. Enhancing the possibility of achieving a role exit for self-helpers is thus achieved (Ebaugh, 1988).

There are no easy answers. One evening an informant brought some sayings to the group. They were: *"Life is Difficult"* and, *"If you would only accept how tough life is, you would find it much, much easier."* Through learning together I think in some cases a toleration for ambiguity is achieved. This is the case of one informant who illustrates this ambiguity by tolerating the good with the bad, as she speaks of her years going through separation and divorce. Her account had included abuse and in her divorce process she not only lost her home and income but her faith as well. Yet in conclusion she said about her experience through those years when she was first separated:

Anybody looking at me would say they were the worst years of your life and in some ways they were but out of that they were the best years of my life . . . How do you make sense of that?

A kind of creativity born out of need is what I see at work here, that is when kin does not work (Bohannon, 1970:8, 1985:32) and individuals must make of their lives what they can. Losing a sense of self they can remake an account of themselves, their lives, their deeds and in the process begin again. Perhaps "cure" in Kennedy and Humphreys'

(1994) sense is achieved in that an account of a stressful situation is constructed. Maybe “belonging” somewhere will happen, maybe a toleration for ambivalence “*the good with the bad*”, “*the best years/the worst years*,” will come. In ways such as these, individuals may be able to move beyond the circumstances in their personal lives post-divorce.

Although I looked at the medicalisation model with respect to these self-help groups I did not find evidence of overt medicalisation of a problem in the groups that I sat in on. I would suggest that the issues dealt with in a self-help group for separating and divorcing people are fundamentally different to many other types of self-help groups whose mandate is to deal with life adjustments relevant to health and wellness topics specifically. I conclude that in the groups I studied by allowing accounts to be built, the self-help groups are adaptive at the micro level and I hear this adaptivity from informants’ voices and their lived experience within the groups.

The strength of the research is in its attention to the voice of the informants. Being true to informants and privileging their voice is part of the approach that I took. I wanted to avoid the polemics inherent in the topic and rather use accounts from fieldwork. I find Morrissey’s comments on the insufficiency of semi-structured interviews more true than ever at the end of this project (Morrissey, 1991). As she suggests, it is through participant observation that one does indeed learn more. Thus, although I craft a representation (Geertz, 1968; Clifford and Marcus, 1986) I feel it is one that provides insights. It is not thoroughly representative of the face of Canadian divorce but may represent some faces, some of the time. The sample after all only matches the representatively sampled G.S.S. on separation and divorce in certain ways, (income, age,

religion and number of children) but not in others.

Given that my informants only represent some faces of the divorce experience, nevertheless, the result of my research is an appreciation of those faces. For example, I remain impressed by the damage two people can do to one another. I remember the feeling that this area is a “battlezone.” A lot of people are being damaged here. Also with the disintegration of family for many there is a change of identities, and loss of faith accompanied by a sense of crisis. These people need support.

Although the study answers the final two of the four main research questions, (what happens inside self-help groups and what are their benefits), it does not adequately address the first two research questions; who uses self-help and why. Given the reluctance of forthcoming interviewees it was not possible in the time allowed to accurately answer these questions. More data are necessary, especially additional interviewees, collected over a longer period of time.

The focus of this research was groups for the separating and divorcing population and the value of this is that it is framed through the ideas and actions of participants. Little has been written on post-divorce programmes for people (Emery et al, 1999) and the few studies that do exist have not focussed on what people say and do. The research contributes to the divorce literature in that the subjective experience of divorce is described in the words of informants, a rarity in the extant sociological literature.

Self-help is also a topic that is under-researched (aside from Wuthnow (1994). What may contribute to this lack of data on self-help is the informal nature of the self-help group itself (Lavoie et al, 1994:2). My thesis adds to the literature by contributing

knowledge of such a programme from within. These data on the internal workings of groups address many under-represented issues in the area, such as how groups work, what they provide to members, when they meet, etc., as told in the words of the participants. Each group does seem to have a “career” or a developmental trajectory as suggested in the literature (Borkman, 1999) and certainly from participant observation this is what I saw during the period 1998 to 2000 when I attended a variety of groups.

This work is also an addition to the AA literature which though extensive does not have a great deal of research on groups from the participant’s point of view. That said, I do not see these self-help groups as truly akin to AA and its world view, as the issues addressed depart from AA’s mandate.

In conclusion then I have found from the words of my informants that self-help groups are adaptive when considered at the micro level. They can help individuals find meaning, improve their mental health, re-socialize themselves to society and create a new identity by reconstructing self. They can also fill gaps more normally filled by family, using a notion of family as a metaphor for the new relationships that are forged in groups.

Beyond the words of informants however, it is necessary to take the analysis one step further. I believe self-help groups are adaptive in the short term, however there are issues beyond this that need to be addressed. It is unlikely that group members will provide support in the long term particularly as they cannot replace the material resources of a family and were not designed to do so. Bittman and Pixley (1997) point out that the investments in relationships are not transferable at divorce and through this mechanism we see the creation of the new poor, the so-called “feminization of poverty”, in this case post-

divorce (Weitzman, 1985). This is not addressed by self-help. In other words when a previous social form is destroyed we must be aware of the limitations of the forms that seem at least in the short term to take its place.

There are areas that need attention that this exploratory piece of research is unable to address. In particular there is the issue of the long term outcomes for those who have used self-help. We also need to understand the efficacy of alternative forms of family as compared to those which they attempt to replace. As well work is needed in order to address issues about the relationship between the “divorce industry” and the situation of families that are impacted by the financial costs associated with the divorce process as they transform from nuclear families to binuclear ones.

Appendix 1

Informed Consent Form

Susan Bedford, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Dr., Ottawa, Ont. Canada K1S 5B6 Tel. 613-860-0903, e-mail:slb108@hotmail.com

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Chair: Prof. John de Vries, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Carleton University, 1125 Colonel By Dr., Ottawa, Ont. Canada K1S 5B6 Tel. 520 2600 ext. 2613

An informed consent form gives an informant information about the nature of the sociological research in which they are participating and the opportunity to give their consent to participate and to withdraw from the research at any point.

The aim of the study is to talk to family members about their experiences of family change and dissolution. Of particular interest are the ways in which people feel related to others and the support received from family and self-help groups.

Questions will be asked about the type of family, experiences of family transformation and self-help group participation. In-depth interviews lasting approximately an hour each will be required, thus the informant's time will be needed. Occasionally, the retelling of an individual's story of family change may be uncomfortable for the individual involved. The interviews will occur at a location of the informant's choice.

The informant has the right to withdraw at any time, or to refuse to answer questions, particularly if the information is felt to be personal. The information will be kept confidential and the anonymity of informants will be protected by the researcher.

A summary of the research will be sent to all participants and a copy of the thesis will be sent to the participating self-help group.

In signing this consent form the informant does not waive their rights. The informant is aware of the nature of the research and has agreed to participate.

Signed.....

Signed(researcher).....

Appendix 2

Semi Structured Interview Guide

- 1) Tell me the story of how your family has changed over the years
- 2) a) Who do you feel closest to?
b) How often do you see these persons?
c) What is the length of your connection with that person?
d) What do you call the people in your family group?
e) Where are these people?
- 3) Are there conflictual relationships?
- 4) Who gives you support financial or otherwise?
- 5) Tell me the story of how you become involved with your self-help group.
- 6) How does the group help you?
- 7) Do you have separated and divorced friends who don't use the group and are they different from you?

Appendix 3

Questionnaire

The following questions are to collect demographic information about the group.

DATE

DATE OF BIRTH   day month year

SEX   male\female

LEGAL MARITAL STATUS   Legally married (and not separated)

                                                 Legally married and separated

                                                 Divorced

                                                 Widowed

                                                 Living common-law

                                                 Never married (single)

                                                 Other

ETHNIC ORIGIN

To which ethnic or cultural group did this person's ancestors belong?

French

English

German

Scottish

Italian

Irish

Ukrainian

Chinese

Dutch

Jewish

Polish

Black

North American Indian

Metis

Inuit\Eskimo

Other ethnic or cultural groups: e.g.

Portuguese, Greek, Indian from India,
Pakistani, Filipino, Vietnamese,
Japanese, Lebanese, Haitian, etc. (specify)

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RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION

specify either one religion or

denomination only or no religion

No religion
Protestant
Catholic
Hindu
Unitarian
Jewish
Buddhist
Mormon
Moslem
Other

CHILDREN

None
Number of children?
Ages?

EDUCATION

What is the highest grade of secondary school you have achieved?

How many years of university education have you completed?

How many years of schooling, other than university, have you completed?

What certificates, diplomas or degrees etc have you obtained?

OCCUPATION

Employment For Pay/Not for Pay

Location At home/Elsewhere

Please state the nature of your work.

Professional\Technical
Managers/Administrators
Sales
Clerical
Craftsperson
Service Worker
Private Household worker
Artist
Parent
Student
Unemployed
Retired

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INCOME IN 1998

(please circle)

under \$20,000	\$20,000 - \$39,000	\$40,000 - \$59,000
\$60,000 - \$79,000	\$80,000 and over	

Appendix 4

Self-help Books as Found in the Field

Anderson, Keith MacSkimming, Roy 1998	<i>On Your Own Again: The Down-To-Earth Guide to Getting Through a Divorce or Separation and Getting on With Your Life.</i> Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
Beattie, Melody 1987	<i>Co-dependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself.</i> Center City, MN: Hazelden Information & Educational Services.
Booth, Leo 1995	<i>Meditations for Compulsive People: Creating Healthy Spirituality.</i> New York: Self Realization Fellowship Publications.
Burmeister, Alice Monte, Tom 1997	<i>The Touch of Healing.</i> New York: Bantam.
Cameron-Bandler, Leslie Lebeau, Michael 1986	<i>The Emotional Hostage: Rescuing your emotional life.</i> Moab, Utah: Real People Press.
Covey, Richard. 1990	<i>The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic.</i> New York: Fireside.
Gray, Johny 1998	<i>Mars and Venus Starting Over: A Practical Guide for Finding Love Again After a Painful Breakup, Divorce, or the Loss of a Loved One.</i> New York: HarperCollins.
Hendrix, Harville 1990	<i>Getting the Love You Want: A Guide for Couples.</i> New York: Harperperennial Library.
Hay, Louise L. 1999	<i>You Can Heal Your Life.</i> Carlsbad, CA: Hay House.
Larsen, Earnie 1987	<i>Stage II Relationships, Love Beyond Addiction.</i> New York: Harper Collins.
Morrison, Douglas A., Witt, Christopher P. 1989	<i>From Loneliness to Love.</i> Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
Orlick, Terry 1998	<i>Embracing Your Potential.</i> Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics Publications.

- Schaeff, Ann Wilson
1992 *Co-dependence: Misunderstood - Mistreated.* San Francisco: Harper.
- Silverstein, Shel
1981 *The Missing Piece Meets The Big O.* New York: Harpercollins.
- Thoele, Sue Patton
1998 *The Woman's Book of Courage.* New York: MJF Books.
- Vanzant, Iyanla,
1998 *In the Meantime: Finding Yourself and the Love You Want.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Vanzant, Iyanla,
1998 *One Day My Soul Just Opened Up: 40 Days And 40 Nights Toward Spiritual Strength And Personal Growth.* New York: Fireside.
- Vanzant, Iyanla,
1993 *Acts of Faith : Daily Meditations for People of Color.* New York: Fireside.

Appendix 5

Statistical Table Comparing GSS 10 with Collected Demographic Data

Category	Sample = 20 Separated and Divorced People in Self-Help groups	G.S.S.(Cycle 10, 1995) Separating and Divorcing People
Gender		
Male	30% (6)	42%
Female	70% (14)	58%
Age		
30-39	25% (5)	} 75%
40-49	40% (8)	
50-59	20% (4)	
over 60	15% (3)	
Ethnicity		Not Available
French	40% (8)	
Scots	15% (3)	
English	20% (4)	
Irish	10% (2)	
German	5% (1)	
Norwegian	5% (1)	
Polish	5% (1)	
# of Children		
One	10% (2)	15%
Two	40% (8)	} 51%
Three	25% (5)	
Four	15% (3)	14%
None	10% (2)	
Age of Children (sample 42)	(Out of 42)	Not Available
Over 18	55% (23)	
12-17	29% (12)	
7-11	11% (5)	
under 7	5% (2)	

Religious Background		
Roman Catholic	45% (9)	42%
Protestant	40% (8)	35%
No Religion	15% (3)	19%
Level of Education		
B.A. or above	45% (9)	15%
Post Secondary	10% (5)	49%
Secondary or lower	30% (6)	35%
Occupation		
Managerial and Professional	50% (10)	19%
Skilled, Clerical	25% (5)	23%
Trades, Manual	5% (1)	35%
Retired	5% (1)	N.A.
Unemployed	15% (3)	N.A.
Income		
Over \$80,000	10% (2)	} 6%
\$79,999 - \$60,000	10% (2)	
\$59,999 - \$40,000	25% (5)	} 35%
\$39,999 - \$20,000	40% (8)	
under \$20,000	15% (3)	40%

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