WOMEN COPING WITH DIVORCE

THROUGH SOCIAL SUPPORT

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of social support in women coping with divorce in mid-life. Five women were interviewed and a qualitative analysis undertaken, in order to explore the subjective experience of social support during the period of separation and divorce, and its effect on post-divorce adjustment. In particular, the usefulness of formal support groups was examined. It was found that most of the women derived perceived social support from friends and female family members, as well as from their church membership and work environment. It appeared that social support facilitated adjustment in several ways, but most notably in providing esteem support and emotional support which enabled personal growth. All of the women felt that they had developed a sense of their own identity through the process of divorce. Support groups were found to be potentially effective in providing assistance in dealing with emotional issues such as anger and forgiveness, as well as practical and informational support. Such groups might also provide a temporary community where divorced women can interact with other people who are experiencing the same things, thereby freeing them to grieve. The study illuminated the subjective, often unique experience of separation and divorce; this emphasises the challenge for support groups to offer support which addresses this uniqueness.

Key terms: social support; divorce; women; support groups; divorce adjustment.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

1.1   BACKGROUND

Divorce is considered to be a highly stressful life-event, second only to the death of
a spouse on the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). It is a
life-event that is imbued with social, cultural, and religious meaning, resulting in
different subjective experiences of stress. In the aftermath of separation and
divorce, individuals report depression, anger, anxiety, a reduction in self-esteem,
and feelings of betrayal and abandonment (Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993). In
addition to the 'primary' stress (Pearlin, 1989) of divorce, 'secondary' stress is
created through relocating, financial difficulties, single-parenting, or a change in
lifestyle. It appears that women, in particular, are more vulnerable to such
stressors.

In the changing South African society divorce rates are of considerable concern.
Statistics available from the South African Department of Statistics show a crude
divorce rate of 81 per 100 000 of the population. This statistic *excludes* divorces
granted by religious or traditional authorities outside the civil courts. Note, too,
that 'per 100 000' refers to 100 000 of the *population*, and NOT to per 100 000 of
marriage (Stats SA, 1998). Thus, more and more women are finding themselves in
a post-divorce situation of single parenting, often financially insecure, with limited
resources to cope with the hardships that they encounter. By choosing as the focus
of this study the influence of social support on coping with divorce, it is felt that the
effectiveness of interventions designed specifically for the assistance of divorced
women can be maximised.

Increasingly, divorce is viewed as a process rather than as a single life-event
(Riessman & Gerstel, 1985; Caldwell & Bloom, 1982). Kitson (1992) summarises
the types of loss that may be associated with divorce: "Although divorce is thought

of as *an* event, it actually entails a pileup of events, each of which may contribute to a wrenching series of losses: loss of friends and family, loss of status, possibly loss of one's children, and sometimes loss of financial security" (p. 18). Following this concept of divorce as loss, Parkes (1975) and Wiseman (1975) equate adjusting to divorce with the mourning or dying process. Gullo (1992) describes the concept of 'love shock' as a state of emotional emptiness and disorientation following the dissolution of a significant love relationship. This author proposes an emotional course that occurs in a typical order:

> Shock – the individual experiences numbness and loss of self
>
> Grief – obsessional thinking, despair, yearning for reconciliation
>
> Blame – the individual blames self or others for the loss
>
> Magnification – magnifies the partner's post-separation positive situation

and

> her negative situation
>
> Resignation – resigns herself to the failure of the relationship
>
> Renewal – the individual begins to lead a life of her own.

Loss of social identity and self-image almost inevitably occurs during the process of divorce (Kitson, 1992; Faust, 1987; Spanier & Thompson, 1984). This is often a result of societal norms and expectations, such as 'marriage is forever' and the assumption that being married is indicative of maturity or fulfilment. Divorce, then, may be perceived as a failure in an important role (Albrecht, 1980). This is particularly true for women who, despite the modern trend encouraging careers for women, are largely defined by their role as mother and wife. A woman takes her husband's name upon marriage; their place of residence is often determined by where her husband works; and her career is usually deemed secondary to that of her husband. These are the threads of self-identity which are unravelled by divorce. Haber (1990) explains that, from a family systems perspective, loss of self through divorce is more likely to occur in individuals who have a lower level of differentiation of self. When the self in marriage is defined as a 'common self' shared with a spouse, the boundaries between individual identities become blurred. Termination of the marriage relationship is likely to result in a significant sense of

loss and dysfunction for one or both spouses. Following divorce, many women experience the feeling that they no longer know who they are.

Loss of self-esteem is related to experiences of rejection, feeling undesirable, and a lack of confidence in one's own judgement. Separation from a spouse requires a woman to redefine who she is.

Women, specifically, also face certain hardships following the termination of a marriage, from which men are often shielded. Women are most frequently awarded the custody of children, reside with them, and are responsible for their daily well-being. They are responsible for the entire household. With this increase in parental responsibility, women are also more likely to confront a reduction in income after a divorce, and to be dependent on maintenance payments from their former husbands. Such payments may be inadequate or unpredictable.

Many studies have documented the effect of financial constraints on women's distress following divorce (Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet, & Kitson, 1998; Thabes, 1997; Riessman, 1990). Many of the women who head single-parent families as a result of divorce are living in or close to poverty (McLanahan & Booth, 1989). In addition, women may have to take up formal employment in order to support their families. This results in role overload and general fatigue, further exacerbating their parenting problems.

Indeed, several studies have noted that divorced women with children experience more stress than those with no children (Riessman, 1990). Riessman (1990) suggests that this is not simply as a consequence of single-parenting difficulties, but also because women take upon themselves their children's stress.

In addition to the practical stresses associated with divorce, there are psychological issues that must be addressed by those adjusting to marital separation. A great tumult of feelings is experienced by these people: anger, resentment, bitterness, jealousy, loneliness and betrayal; as well as ambivalence about being parted from a partner to whom they still feel attached and yet from whom they are relieved to be

separated (Riessman, 1990; Kitson, 1992; Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993).

Gettleman and Markowitz (1974) maintain, however, that the negative aspects of divorce for women have been overemphasised. They see divorce as an act of courage that may be liberating and the start of an important stage of emotional growth.

How adequately and quickly an individual adjusts to new roles following marital dissolution may be determined, in part, by support from other people (Holloway & Machida, 1991). Following divorce or separation, fluctuations occur in the social networks of women, often diminishing initially (Nelson, 1995). In addition, through the occurrence of divorce, women lose an important source of support - their husband and his family; this at a time when they most require support. Various supportive interventions, such as support groups, may be useful at this time.

One of the ways in which social support may act is as an assurance of continuity in a time of great change, enabling individuals to "re-establish their equilibrium and routines more rapidly" (Kitson, with Holmes, 1992, p. 223).

Social support thus appears to serve as a buffer against the effects of stress related to divorce, and also may have a main effect on the adjustment of individuals in the post-divorce period.

Perceptions of stress and social support are dynamic processes rather than stable features of life, therefore it will be necessary to demonstrate, through use of the case studies, how stress and support **interact** throughout the process of separation and divorce. Cutrona and Russell (1990) propose that optimal support is determined by the type of support offered in response to the kind of stress experienced by the individual.

Coping behaviours used to deal with stress are not stable, enduring aspects of life,

but change according to the situation and within individuals (Pledge, 1992; Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman & Lazarus, 1987). As divorce is a process, it may be expected that coping behaviours for each individual will change over time. Dunkel-Schetter et al. (1987) divide coping into two broad areas: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping.

In the situation of divorce, the individual often has little opportunity to actively change or control circumstances. Thus, emotion-focused coping – in which the individual manages her emotional response to the stressor rather than trying to change the situation - may be more effective than problem-focused coping.

How a divorced person appears to be coping influences the amount and type of social support that they receive. Silver, Wortman, and Crofton (1990) point out the effect that an individual's coping self-presentation has on the willingness of support providers to assist. For example, a poor coping self-presentation (emphasising difficulties and negative aspects) results in avoidance of the sufferer and rejection by others, and a lack of support.

Cutrona, Suhr and MacFarlane (1990) focus on the type of behaviours used by individuals to elicit social support when confronted with a stressful situation. The behaviour/s selected by a sufferer in order to elicit social support is dependent on a variety of factors, such as social comparison and attributional processes, motivational factors, self-esteem, characteristics of the relationship, the nature of the stressor, and temporal factors (Eckenrode & Wethington, 1990). In the case of divorced women help-seeking behaviour tends to decrease over time as they adapt to the marital separation (Nelson, 1995).

An important aspect of dealing with divorce is coping with a former spouse, which includes a greater or lesser degree of forgiveness. In a study carried out by Mazor, Batiste-Harel and Gampel (1998), three patterns of coping were identified: *integrative, semi-integrative,* and *non-integrative.* Use of the integrative pattern by an individual indicates that they view the divorce experience as part of their life; this

is associated with strategies to confront difficulties in order to reduce anger and to move on. The semi-integrated pattern is found in individuals still struggling to integrate and accept the divorce experience. People using non-integrated coping patterns refuse to accept the divorce experience; they blame the former spouse; the strategy used is to avoid painful areas.

Coping with children following divorce or separation is a challenge faced by many women. Mothers may have little control over certain aspects of their situation, such as their income or the behaviour of their ex-spouse, while they have a responsibility to maintain control over their children's behaviour. Holloway and Machida (1991) found that mothers who reported greater distress in parenting tended to rely more on escape/avoidance strategies than did women who reported less distress. A further issue revealed by this study was that women who relied on their own families for social support used less coping strategies, and particularly less problem-solving, than women who relied on friends.

Social support is essentially a subjective experience in that individual perceptions of what constitutes 'support' may differ greatly, depending on a wide variety of factors. These factors, such as support schemata, personality traits and relationship experiences, result in uniquely individual experiences of supportive behaviours.
It must also be borne in mind that the process of terminating a stressful and/or abusive relationship, gaining new skills, and confronting the challenge of starting a 'new' life may be a very positive experience for some individuals. This study will explore the aspects of social support that enhance this positive adjustment.

1.2   OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This research project will use the case-study method. Five case studies of divorced women will be used to explore the subjective experience of divorce, focusing on the impact that social support from various sources has had on this experience.

In particular, the study will focus on the effect of social support on the types and

levels of stress experienced by the women; the coping strategies that they employ; and their adjustment to post-divorce life. Differences and similarities in the experience and influence of social support on the women's coping strategies and adjustment will be identified.

By assessing the impact of social support on a highly stressful life-event such as divorce, it is possible to make recommendations regarding the organisation and process of supportive interventions with a view to enhancing their effectiveness.

1.3   PRESENTATION

In order to address these objectives, chapter 2 will provide an overview of the literature surrounding social support, with particular reference to its role in coping with divorce. The methodology is discussed in chapter 3, which includes a description of the participants, measures, method of data analysis, and ethical considerations pertinent to the study. In chapters 4 to 8 the analysed data is presented, with each chapter focusing on the experience of a single participant. Conclusions and recommendations are addressed in chapter 9.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine definitions of social support as the fulfilment of ongoing needs, and social support as response to stressful life events. Within each of these classifications models of social support will be reviewed, with particular reference to their relevance in the context of divorce.

Research into support groups for divorced women, the type of support offered, the effectiveness of such support, and the role of the facilitator is discussed. This is followed by an overview of the communication of social support. Finally, the role of social support as an important aspect of post-divorce adjustment is examined.

2.2   DEFINING SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support can be defined either in terms of its long-term, ongoing effects (i.e. the fulfilment of basic, ongoing needs) or as the fulfilment of specific needs arising at a particular time as a result of stressful life-events. Both perspectives will be discussed below and then integrated as relevant to divorce.

2.2.1   Social support as the fulfilment of ongoing social needs

Underlying this view of social support is the assumption that relationships with others are important for our sense of well-being. Relationships that enhance well-being serve six different functions (Weiss, 1974): *attachment, reassurance of worth, guidance, reliable alliance, social integration,* and *the opportunity to provide nurturance to another.* Social support is thus defined as "access to relationships that meet these kinds of fundamental interpersonal needs" (Cutrona, 1996, p. 3).

In this view, the needs met by social support are not associated primarily with

stressful events, but are everyday, ongoing requirements for mental health. Thus, a 'main effect' (Cohen & Wills, 1985) of social support is that, regardless of the level of stress or crisis, social support enhances the quality of life. Indeed, social support may even prevent everyday stress; Sansom and Farnill (1997) found that newly divorced or separated individuals experienced less stress when they had more support, both in terms of social integration and attachment to others.

2.2.2 Social support as the fulfilment of needs resulting from stressful circumstances

According to this view, support received from others in times of crisis has a 'buffering effect' (Cohen & Wills, 1985), which helps protect the individual from the harmful effects that stress may have on physical and mental well-being. For example, in divorced individuals reporting high levels of stress, higher self-esteem, greater family cohesion, and higher availability of social support, were positively associated with lower levels of psychiatric symptoms (Garvin, Kalter, & Hansell, 1993).

Social support is thus viewed as interactions following adverse circumstances; the implication is that such support is problem-oriented. It appears to be widely accepted in the social support field that there are different components of social support which serve different functions: emotional support, tangible assistance, cognitive information, and directive guidance (Stokes & Wilson, 1984); or, as Cohen & Wills (1985) suggest: esteem support, information support, instrumental support, and social companionship. Cobb (1979) labeled the components emotional support, network support, esteem support, material support, instrumental support and active support. A supportive action may serve one of these functions or a combination of functions in relation to the problem being experienced.

2.2.3 Combining the perspectives

These two definitions of social support are not mutually exclusive. Social support may fulfil both ongoing and immediate needs at different times and in different situations. The main effects of social support function as a backdrop to the crises

which occur on occasion. In the case of divorced women, there is a requirement for ongoing social support offering care, a sense of belonging to a group of similar others, reassurance of worth, and unconditional assistance. At the same time, social support fulfils the function of buffering the effects of more immediate stressors experienced by divorced women; stressors such as single-parenting issues, financial difficulties or loneliness.

The above definitions focus on the positive effects of social support. However, social support may also have a negative impact on the recipient. Receiving support from another person can carry with it the implication that the recipient is incompetent or weaker than the provider of support, thereby undermining the recipient's self-evaluation (Beach, Fincham, Katz & Bradbury, 1996). For example, a divorced woman who is forced, due to circumstances, to return to her parents' home may feel inadequate. A woman who, out of necessity, accepts financial assistance from family members may see herself as dependent on and indebted to others (Kessler, House, Anspach & Williams, 1995).

Thus, an important point to note is that it is not social support *per se* that is beneficial to health and well-being. Positive outcomes arise from *perceived social support* (the belief that help will be available) (Cutrona, 1996) as opposed to *received social support* (the amount of help-intended behaviours directed at the recipient) (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983). It is the subjective experience of others' helping behaviour that determines whether such assistance is considered supportive or not by the recipient. Several models of social support are aimed at understanding the determinants of individual differences in levels of perceived support.

2.3   MODELS AND THEORIES OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

Various models of social support have been proposed. These models seek to explain aspects of social support such as the determinants of perceived support and consequent adjustment outcomes (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990); the effectiveness of supportive behaviours in the context of different types of stress

(Cutrona & Russell, 1990); the role of social support in coping (Barbee,1990; Pearlin & McCall, 1990); and the influence of social support on identity and health (Swann & Brown, 1990).

This section will take a closer look at an interactive model, a theory of optimal matching, a model of interactive coping and a model of self-verification and health.

2.3.1 An interactive model of social support

Sarason, Pierce and Sarason (1990) developed a theoretical model of social support and adjustment outcomes which emphasises the interaction of relationship aspects involved in social support, personality characteristics, perceived support and receipt of support. This model proposes that a sense of acceptance (formed by early attachment relationships) influences the nature of current relationships in terms of the ability to engage in adult relationships, expectations of such relationships, effectiveness of interpersonal skills and the ability to cope.

It proposes that securely attached adults have a trusting view of relationships, with expectations of positive regard and acceptance from the other person, as well as possessing more effective social skills, a more task-focused coping style, a favourable self-concept, and less anxiety. According to Sarason et al. (1990), these factors all contribute to an individual's level of perceived support; simplistically, individuals with a positive sense of acceptance (as defined by the above-mentioned factors) will experience higher levels of perceived social support than individuals with a more negative sense of acceptance. For example, Sarason et al. (1990) found that conversation partners who rated themselves higher in social support were rated by independent judges as more socially skilled and interpersonally attractive.

Although an individual's sense of acceptance appears to be a relatively enduring personality characteristic, it is possible that the experience of divorce disrupts certain components such as self-concept, positive expectations of support in relationships, and anxiety levels. Searcy and Eisenberg (1992) found that low levels of support seeking are associated with lower levels of support receipt. "Social self-

efficacy" has been found to predict perceived levels of social support (Mallinckrodt, 1992). This could possibly result in divorced women receiving less perceived support than actually required during a period of extreme stress.

2.3.2 A theory of optimal matching

Divorce as a life-event comprises many different kinds of stress and stressors. Cutrona and Russell (1990) investigated the theory that individual components of social support such as emotional support, network support (social integration), esteem support, tangible aid, and informational support are differentially associated with positive well-being depending on the kind of stress that the individual is confronting. This theory differentiates between types of stressful events along the subjectively appraised dimensions of desirable or undesirable events, controllable or uncontrollable events, duration of consequences, and experience of a social loss.

In a complex integration of types of stress and components of support, Cutrona and Russell (1990) hypothesised that certain components of social support are more beneficial to an individual's physical and mental health than others in different situations. In the domain of controllable vs uncontrollable events, they hypothesised that uncontrollable events require more emotional and tangible support. For example, a woman whose husband leaves her for a younger woman; nothing can be done by the wife to change this, so the support she requires is largely emotional. Controllable events, on the other hand, require more esteem and informational support, as in the case of a woman who is struggling to cope with disciplining her children as a single mother. In terms of duration of the stressful event or its consequences, it was proposed that the longer the effects last, the more emotional and tangible support will be required. The process of divorce may often endure for a long time; the lack of closure for the woman may mean that, even though material needs are met, she still requires emotional support. In addition, the type of loss that is experienced will determine the type of support needed. For example, a loss of assets requires tangible aid, moving to a new neighbourhood would constitute a loss of social network and would need social integration, and so on.

Following this theory, the single event of divorce can be classified according to whether it is appraised as desirable/undesirable or controllable/uncontrollable, how enduring the effects are, and the type of social loss that is involved. However, divorce is not simply a single stressful event but, as mentioned, involves many various stressful situations. This suggests that support through the process of divorce needs to be extremely flexible and appropriate to the situation the individual is experiencing at the time.

Event stress (defined as reactions directly related to the stressful life event) tends to elicit advice, listening and practical assistance. *Added* stress (the result of additional problems and changes occurring around the same time as divorce) elicits the three types of support above as well as material support (Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet & Kitson, 1998). For example, a recently-divorced woman experiencing difficulties with the situation of single-parenting may benefit from emotional support (knowing that others care about her); esteem support (assurance of her competence as a mother); and instrumental support (offers to baby-sit). However, receiving more than one kind of help (e.g. financial assistance and advice) may be more distressing than receiving only one type of support (Kitson, with Holmes, 1992).

Finally, some components of social support are universally beneficial: esteem support and informational support may be beneficial regardless of the nature of the stressful situation (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

2.3.3 Models of interactive coping

Barbee (1990) designed a model of interactive coping which focuses on the *interactive* nature of social support in the cheering-up process between friends or relations, emphasising the interaction of the support provider and support recipient. This model defines the factors which determine how a helper copes with an associate's problem, and which of the helper's behaviours are likely to be perceived as supportive.

Variables that influence coping are affective factors (mood of the helper); cognitive

factors (the helper's perception of the importance of the problem, and of the controllability of both the problem and the solution); relationship factors (closeness and duration of the relationship between the helper and the recipient); and personal factors (such as age and experience of the helper, attachment style). These factors influence the coping strategy that is used by the helper toward the depressed or unhappy friend.

Barbee (1990) also describes three coping strategies used by helpers: *Solve* (e.g. giving suggestions); *Support* (e.g. affirming their ability); *Dismiss* (e.g. telling them that their problem is not serious); or *Escape* (e.g. talking about something else). It is proposed that 'solve' and 'support' strategies are more likely to make the recipient feel better than 'dismiss' or 'escape' strategies.

This model emphasises factors associated with the *helper*. For example, if the depressed person's situation is seen *by the helper* as brought about by the person herself (controllable) and unimportant, the helper may respond with anger and dismiss the person's problem.

Pearlin and McCall (1990) describe three stages of interactive coping in close relationships: (1) revelation of the problem; (2) appraisal of support needs by the partner; and (3) providing support. Various factors affect the outcomes of each of these stages. For example, personality factors such as a belief in self-sufficiency may inhibit disclosure of a problem; attributions about the causes of the problem (controllable or uncontrollable) may inhibit the decision to assist; and the assistance provided may be perceived by the recipient as given grudgingly. Any of these examples may lead to obstacles in the coping process. In the case of divorced women, the interactive nature of the support that they receive is important. For instance, the need for privacy and a belief in loyalty to one's partner (even though the relationship is terminated) may prevent a woman from seeking support.

A further point to be considered in this discussion of the interactive nature of social support is that the process of separation and divorce may be extremely lengthy.

This may well lead to support providers 'burning out'. They might then simply lack the resources to support the divorcee, even when support is sought.

2.3.4 A model of self-verification and health

This model explores the relationship between identity support and health (Swann & Brown, 1990). An individual's identity is, in part, comprised of self-conceptions. Self-conceptions are individuals' ideas about themselves and their worlds; a stable self-concept enables people to control and predict their environment. Actions on the part of others (identity support) that confirm a person's self-concept assist in stabilising his or her identity. Feedback from others about the self that is inconsistent with one's self-concept results in discomfort; consequently, people prefer to be with others who provide identity support in terms of confirming their self-concept, "even if the self-conception happens to be negative" (Swann & Brown, 1990, p. 153).

Major life events, such as divorce, de-stabilise an individual's self-concept (identity disruption) and may undermine health by reducing perceptions of control which leads to cognitive, motivational, and affective deficits, and to diminished immune system functioning.

It is felt that, for the purpose of this study, the main implication of this model is the concept of identity support and its function of maintaining a stable self-conception. This model would predict that the identity disruption which occurs at the time of divorce may be stabilised by supportive others who confirm a positive self-conception, thereby enhancing the health of the individual.

2.4 COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

2.4.1 Communicating the need for social support

Communicating the need for social support is a particularly complex process that can be fraught with difficulty and risk. This process involves several phases which broadly comprise: perception, appraisal and revelation of the situation; the decision

to seek support and assessment of resources; strategies of seeking help and the types of support mobilised. (Gross & McMullen, 1983; Pearlin & McCall, 1990). Eckenrode and Wethington (1990) refer to a variety of factors which may influence the support-seeking process, such as social comparison and attributional processes, motivational factors, self-esteem, characteristics of the relationship, gender, setting, the nature of the stressor, and temporal factors.

The communication of distress as a signal that support is needed also has implications for both the sufferer and the potential support provider. Requesting support may have implications of weakness, vulnerability and failure that are threatening to an individual's self-concept (Nadler, 1983). Disclosure of a problem has the potential benefits of receiving information, advice, emotional support or validation. This is balanced by the risks of disclosure, such as stigma or violation of confidentiality (Goldsmith & Parks, 1990). The potential support provider may also feel vulnerable and helpless in the face of another's distress, and may experience uncertainty about whether or not to provide support.

Silver, Wortman and Crofton (1990) also make the point that victims of life crises do not always get the support that they need to assist them in coping with the crisis. The dilemma faced by people undergoing a life crisis is that if they demonstrate vulnerability and lack of coping, others may respond by moving away from that person, rather than offering support. However, if they don't display distress, or if they hide the fact that they are experiencing difficulty in coping, they do not signal the need for support and, consequently, do not receive support. It appears that there is a fine balance between expressing enough appropriate distress in order to elicit support, and suppressing certain distress to avoid creating discomfort in potential support providers. The question is: how best can a victim express distress in order to elicit support rather than avoidance?

In the Silver et al. (1990) study, they found that different coping self-presentations on the part of sufferers elicited varying levels of support from others. Summarised

briefly, it appears that a 'poor coping self-presentation' (emphasising difficulties and negative aspects) results in avoidance of the sufferer and rejection by others, and a lack of support. Communicating no information about how one is coping creates uncertainty and confusion in the potential support provider, and support is unlikely to be offered. Responses to both positive (coping well) and balanced (disclosure of distress but taking steps to manage) coping self-presentations are more favourable; but those responding to such self-presentations are still likely to experience discomfort, simply because the sufferer is a victim of a life crisis. It seems likely that a balanced coping self-presentation will elicit more effective support because this reduces the potential support provider's feelings of helplessness (the victim is employing self-help tactics), as well as reducing the amount of responsibility the support provider will have to take (the victim is taking a degree of responsibility for himself or herself).

Cutrona, Suhr and MacFarlane (1990) focus on the type of behaviours used by individuals to elicit social support when confronted with a stressful situation. These behaviours include, among others, complaining about a stressful situation, requesting specific kinds of support, verbal or nonverbal emotional displays, appealing to the qualifications of the supporter, doing nothing, and expressing doubt about coping capability. As mentioned above, the behaviour/s selected by a sufferer in order to elicit social support is dependent on a variety of factors, such as the sufferer's sense of support, the relationship between the sufferer and the support provider, gender, personality characteristics and beliefs.

In the case of divorced women help-seeking behaviour tends to decrease over time as they adapt to the marital separation (Nelson, 1995). Interestingly, in this study separated women also reported conflict with more network members than did married women, possibly because of the poor coping self-presentation, or because the type of support elicited (advice, for example) had a negative impact on the recipient.

2.4.2 Supportive communication

As the point has been made that support is 'in the eye of the beholder', it is necessary to explore how support is provided so that it is perceived as supportive.

In order to understand the types of communication that constitute supportive communication, it is useful to look at Cutrona, Suhr and MacFarlane's (1990) study, in which thirty-three categories of support-intended behaviours were identified in the five broad types of support. A few examples of these behaviours are:

- Information support   -   suggestion/advice
                                     referral
                                     teaching

- Esteem support   -   compliment
                                     reassurance
                                     validation

- Tangible assistance   -   loan
                                     direct task
                                     tension reduction

- Emotional support -   willingness
                                     physical affection
                                     sympathy
                                     listening

- Network support   -   presence
                                     access

How these support-intended behaviours are perceived by the recipient may be determined by three classes of variables (Pierce, 1994): (1) situational - setting, tasks; (2) intrapersonal - individuals' "general dispositions to engage in, respond to, and interpret social behavior in particular ways" (Pierce, 1994, p. 261); and (3) interpersonal contexts - expectations of the relationship and the extent to which the relationship is a source of support.

Miller and Ray (1994) add a further important dimension to the perception of communications as supportive: that of 'meaning'. They propose that an important

consideration in the analysis of the communication of support is the messages that make "a special impact on individuals - those messages that are remembered and lead people to believe that support has been provided and that there are people they can count on in the future should support again be needed" (Miller & Ray, 1994). They also explore the concept of a "semantic network" (Miller & Ray, 1994, p. 223); that is, the network of shared meaning that exists between people. Social support is likely to be perceived as supportive by the recipient if the provider has shared values and understandings (Lin & Dean, 1984).

Who are the sources of support for divorced women? The majority of these women report another woman as their primary support person (Duffy & Smith, 1994). The group most frequently identified by divorced women as support providers is friends, who are also often described as the most efficient helpers (D'Ercole, 1988).

2.5   SUPPORT GROUPS

Women experiencing divorce often find themselves in a situation that is not shared by friends and family. The problems they experience are different to those experienced by other members of their community, and consequently they may feel isolated from the community. It appears that having a temporary community which shares similar experiences may be useful in the aftermath of divorce. However, when considering the effectiveness of support groups, it is important to examine the format of the group, the role of the facilitator, and the type of support offered.

2.5.1   The format of the group

The varied needs of divorced individuals makes providing services a complicated matter. Issues such as whether or not there are children involved, religious beliefs, length and number of marriages, emotional/mental health before the divorce and other unique individual circumstances all influence the benefits that an individual may experience in different types of divorce groups.

Charping, Bell and Strecker (1992) compared sixteen programmes designed for divorce adjustment with their own *Divorce Adjustment Group*. Most of the groups reviewed aim "to create an environment which will enable members to move from a point of pain, isolation, and disequilibrium to a point of connectedness, greater stability, and hope" (p. 27). The majority of groups have a combination of objectives, including therapeutic educational and supportive components; while some offer practical assistance, such as legal or financial information, skills for single-parenting, or social skills training.

The groups vary along a continuum in degree of structure. Some are highly structured (Fisher, 1976, 1978), clearly allocating each session to specific content areas. Others are much less structured (Morris & Prescott (1975), leaving the members to determine what is discussed and at what length. The majority of the support groups reviewed used a combination of structured and unstructured interventions. An example of this is a group described by Vera (1993); this programme was based on Fishers' (1981) book *Rebuilding*. Members were asked to do structured 'homework' assignments, such as writing a good-bye letter to the ex-partner; the assignments were reviewed at the next session, and individual issues and concerns would be raised in an unstructured manner. Participants would offer feedback and emotional support.

Graff, Whitehead and Lecompte (1986) compared structured and unstructured group formats and found both useful, but the structured format appeared to be more beneficial for members in the long-term. However, these results are inconclusive, as the counsellors appeared to favour the structured approach and seemed "more encouraging and enthusiastic in the cognitive-behavioral group than in the supportive-insight group" (p. 280). In addition, the sample was limited to women who had been divorced between 8 and 18 months.

A further aspect of the format of divorce adjustment groups is the number and length of sessions in the programme. Charping et al's (1992) comparison shows that most programmes offer 6 to 8 sessions (their own programme runs 10 sessions, as does Vera's (1993)), with the length of session being 2 to 3 hours. This is

justified by the proposition that 10 sessions provide adequate time for most members to "regain a sense of stability, experience some success in relationships, and begin the process of establishing a new identity" (p. 33). If the group continues for longer, the focus becomes diffused, and the group starts to deal with issues less related to divorce adjustment.

Related to the length of the session is the size of the group. The optimal group size appears to be between 8 and 10 members. This allows for rich interaction in each session, and is small enough to become a 'community' for its members.

2.5.2 The role of the facilitator

Charping et al's (1992) comparison shows that 9 of the programmes use co-leaders, with 5 recommending male/female co-leadership. The remainder of the programmes were not specific about the gender of the facilitator. Charping et al (1992) strongly advocate the use of male/female co-leaders in divorce adjustment programmes: "Having both a man and a woman leader in the group provides an opportunity for members to deal more honestly with issues related to the opposite gender that may have been triggered by the divorcing process" (p. 30).

What is perhaps more important is that the facilitator of a divorce adjustment group is a skilled, professional group leader, who understands group dynamics, and is capable of facilitating the expression of strong and often painful emotions.

2.5.3 Types of support offered

The benefits of a divorce support group are obviously very subjective and will depend a great deal on factors such as the circumstances, personality and history of the individual member. However, the effectiveness of support groups in general, and the effectiveness of certain specific programmes, has been documented. Charping Bell and Strecker (1992) designed a questionnaire to measure helpful/unhelpful aspects of group treatment following divorce. Most helpful aspects included the opportunity to be with others who were in the same situation, social support, and the instilling of hope.

This is confirmed by Oygard, Thuen and Solvang (2000) who, in a qualitative evaluation of divorce support groups, found that group participants valued meeting people who had experienced the same thing as themselves, and felt relieved that they were not 'crazy' or alone in their situation. They also experienced increased insight into themselves and their own behaviour through others' stories and feedback. There was a feeling of belonging and being accepted by the group, which facilitated open expression of emotions, all of which contributed to increased well-being among participants.

Support groups may facilitate post-divorce adjustment, both in practical matters and emotional issues. Bloom, Hodges, Kern and McFaddin (1985) found that individuals participating in divorce groups scored significantly higher than controls on adjustment variables, had fewer separation-related problems, greater separation-related benefits, and reported less guilt and self-blame.

Lee and Hett (1990) examined the effects of a specific group intervention designed to teach coping skills to recently divorced adults. Results indicated that, when compared with a control group, the programme reduced depression and anxiety, and increased the ability to live in the present as well as independence.

In an article describing a support group specifically for divorced women over the age of fifty, Norberry (1986) states that such a group provides both emotional and informational support, and that the participants rebuilt their self-esteem and competency through involvement in the group. A general aspect of support groups is that "when women begin to move away from their own deep concerns and become sensitive to one another, they find it therapeutic to be helpful to someone else" (Norberry, 1986, p. 159). In this age-group (over fifty), the focus tends to be on financial management and the maintenance of relationships, rather than on parenting issues.

Addington, (1992) makes the point that, rather than providing general social

support, "[m]any of the groups described in the literature focus on helping divorced parents in their new role as single parents" (Addington, 1992, p. 21). This is a natural focus, as single mothers represent some of the major users of mental health services (McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981).

It appears that support groups may be a valuable source of social support for divorced women. Such groups can provide emotional support, education, skills enhancement and practical advice in the post-divorce period. A major aspect of these groups appears to be the reassurance that the individual is not alone in her situation; nor is she abnormal in the feelings she is experiencing. However, as mentioned, individual differences in experience make it difficult to provide a group that is 'all things to all people'.

2. 6   SOCIAL SUPPORT AND ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING DIVORCE

Spanier and Thompson (1984) define adjustment to divorce as "characterized by a stable and resilient pattern of life, separate from the previous marriage and partner and based on anticipation rather than memory" (p. 103), while Kitson (1992) defines adjustment as "being relatively free of symptoms of psychological disturbance, having a sense of self-esteem, and having put the marriage and former partner in enough perspective that one's identity is no longer tied to being married or to the former partner" (p. 20).

Weiss (1975) argues that continued attachments are normal following divorce, and that these negative attachments may be tied to lingering feeling of betrayal and loss. Such attachments usually become latent if the individuals enter into new romantic attachments.

Is there a typical pattern of adjustment to divorce? Hackney and Bernard (1990) provide a brief overview of various stage models of divorce adjustment as a background to their own Dyadic Divorce Adjustment Model. These stage models include (a) situational states (Bohannan, 1970); (b) grief models (Wiseman, 1975);

(c) developmental stages in emotional identification and adaptation (Levy & Joffe, 1978); (d) legal and personal/emotional developmental stages (Kressel, 1980), and (e) dynamics of family adaptation (Ahrons, 1980; Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987). These models enable us to track an individual's progress through the divorce experience, from indecision to reintegration. However, Hackney and Bernard criticise this type of model on several grounds. As mentioned previously, the grief model tends to ignore the role of the absent spouse in the individual's adjustment. Except for Ahrons (1980) and Ahrons and Rodgers (1987), the stage models concentrate on the *individual's* progression through the divorce process, and are inattentive to the fact that *two* people are experiencing the divorce. Stage models also fail to describe the experience of divorcing individuals who may go back and forth between stages, or revert to earlier stages.

Hackney and Bernard propose a Dyadic Divorce Adjustment Model, which takes into account the *couple* navigating the process of divorce, albeit separately, at different rates, and often in a different order of events or experiences. The basic phases are 'Awareness of Issues', 'Reacting to Issues', 'Compensatory Activities', 'Alienation', 'Physical Separation', 'Legal Divorce', 'Psychic Divorce', and 'Responsible Autonomy'. They suggest that therapeutic intervention at certain points in the process can facilitate adjustment to each phase. What is interesting about this model, is that the basic stages are interwoven with 'levels of experience' which "communicate the different competing realities that the clients may experience at any point in the dyadic adjustment process." (Hackney & Bernard, p. 139). The levels of experience may occur during any phase, may re-occur, and may even occur simultaneously. Level One, indecision, involves the many decisions that make up the divorce process and, although, most likely in the early phases, may be triggered by events such as anniversaries at other times. Level Two, emotionalism, creates much of the drama associated with divorce, and includes anger, regret, fear, and so on. Level Three, Reality, "describes the paradigm shift that occurs when the individual is able to accommodate and plan for the realistic consequences of divorce" (Hackney & Bernard, p. 139). This level focuses on the present and future, rather than on the past. Level Four, renewal, is

the start of the 'psychic divorce', where the individual wants to move on, feels strong enough to survive, and becomes autonomous. This model adequately describes the highly individualistic nature of the divorce process, and the often random emotional, cognitive and situational experiences which seem to be encountered by individuals who are divorcing.

A number of variables have been identified as moderators of divorce adjustment difficulties, including social support, economic factors, children of the marriage, self-esteem, relationship with the former partner, sex-role orientation, and circumstances surrounding the divorce (e.g. who initiated the divorce).

Focusing on social support as a correlate of adjustment to divorce, Garvin, Kalter and Hansell (1993) found that "greater family cohesion, and greater availability of social support were associated with fewer psychiatric symptoms and better social adjustment" (p. 36). A network of supportive people was shown to be related to lower levels of depression by Thabes (1997), while Gallo (1982), in a sample aged sixty and over, found that network density was positively associated with well-being. Kitson (1992) found that some types of support may help adjustment to divorce while other types may hinder adjustment. Miller et al.'s (1998) findings support this: that certain types of support are related to decreased distress in divorced women, for example, having someone listen to them; but other kinds of support, such as advice, are not helpful.

"Women must juggle the roles of mother, worker, and sometimes student, and they frequently turn to others for help. Because of the exigencies of their lives, they cannot maintain the myth of self-sufficiency. There is an unanticipated benefit to these structural pressures: divorced women solidify ties with kin, construct social networks that provide material and emotional aid, and generally intensify their relationships with others" (Riessman, 1990, p. 172).

2.7 CONCLUSION

It is clear from the literature that social support has an important role in assisting women to cope with the stresses of divorce during the separation period. These stresses may continue long into the post-divorce period. Financial and emotional security is not easily regained, with remarriage most viable for women under thirty (Weitzman, 1985). Many divorced women spend a significant amount of time, maybe a lifetime, without a partner. What impact does social support have on how well a woman exits the wife-role and copes with a new role of single woman/mother over time?

One of the influences on adjustment following divorce is the divorced individual's definition of the correctness and appropriateness of the termination of her marriage. "Whether that divorce was defined by significant others as correct or not, certainly would have influence on the final adjustment process for the individual" (Kunz & Kunz, 1995, p. 119). This may be one of the ways in which social support impacts on adjustment, through others validating the individual's definition of the divorce as 'correct'.

In one study it was found that the absence of support, either emotional or material, on the part of friends and family was positively correlated with higher levels of depression five years or more after the divorce (Thabes, 1997). It has also been found that contact with relatives, and participation in organisations and clubs is associated with the feeling that things were better after the divorce than during the divorce process. Individuals that reported the same or more contact with relatives, and the same or increased involvement in organisations and clubs, also rated subsequent marriages as more satisfactory than those people whose contact with relatives and participation in organisations and clubs is less than before the divorce (Kunz & Kunz, 1995).

Divorce, however, is a very subjective experience. In many ways, it is a unique experience, because no two set of circumstances or personalities are identical.

This study explores, through the use of case studies, the experience of five women who were divorced. The qualitative method enables the participants to describe their own process from separation to recovery, and the role of social support during their life crises.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Divorce, and the stress associated with it, is clearly a subjective experience, as is the experience of social support. Each person going through the process of marital breakdown, separation and divorce will have a unique set of events, cognitions, emotions, and outcomes that they will interpret in their own way. "Like death, divorce can be traumatic, because our lives are organized around particular relationships that are crucial to how we find meaning in our lives. When we lose an important relationship, whole structures of meaning disintegrate ... . And these losses often lead to distress, anxiety, and grief. We search for a compass, a new structure to give us bearing .... Central in this process is the development of an account – what happened and why" (Riessman, 1990, p. 3).

As human experience is interpreted by individuals in their own context, it would seem mandatory to use certain qualitative techniques to explore such an experience as divorce.

Qualitative research "is theory generating, inductive, aiming to gain valid knowledge and understanding by representing and illuminating the nature and quality of people's experiences. Participants are encouraged to speak for themselves" (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994, p. 142). In order to explore the stress of divorce and the role of social support, it is important to obtain 'thick descriptions' of individual experiences of these events and processes. This methodology also allows the "honoring of human experience ... . To incorporate, advocate, and verify the full and expansive measure of any human experience studied, however it presents itself to awareness" (Braud & Anderson, 1998, p. xxvi).

In this study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to explore the experience of divorce and social support. The aim was to obtain individual subjective meanings, rather than eliciting responses to a standard format for comparison with other individuals or groups.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

This study used an idiographic case-study approach, with in-depth analysis of five divorced women. This was a convenience sample.

Five white women between the ages of 43 and 59 (with a mean age of 53 years) were approached to participate in the study. All the women were legally divorced at the time, and had neither remarried, nor were engaged in new relationships. The women are all of middle- to high-socioeconomic status and live in urban areas of South Africa. Four of the women are employed full-time, while one works part-time in a family business. All five women have children, ranging in age from 17 to 30. Educational qualifications range from matriculation to Bachelor degrees.

Four of the women were previously known to me, either through mutual membership of a support group, or as personal friends or business associates. The fifth woman was referred to me by one of the other participants.

3.3 THE INTERVIEW

Conventional approaches to interviewing see subjects "as passive vessels of answers for experiential questions put to respondents by interviewers" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 8). However, if one perceives the interviewee as participant, an expert informant of her own experience, the interview becomes a dynamic, meaning-producing occasion.

This study required that women tell their own stories of their experience, including the support that they had, how they coped, and where they found themselves in the

process of adjustment to their life crisis. Thus, the interview was based on a minimal number of open-ended questions and invitations, which enabled the women to choose their own direction in the story-telling. In this way, the interview became a constantly developing conversation between participant and researcher.

Each interview commenced with the invitation: "Tell me how you experienced the process of separation and divorce". Other questions that were asked at different points during the interview process included: "What or who was of assistance to you during the process of separation and divorce?"; "How did you cope?"; "What are the greatest benefits that have resulted from your separation?"; "What was the most difficult thing you experienced in the process of separating?"

3.4   PROCEDURE

Interviews with each of the women were scheduled at their convenience. The interviews were conducted by the researcher and lasted between one and half hours and two and half hours. The interviews were audio-taped with the consent of the participants. Each participant also completed a brief 'Personal Details' questionnaire for demographic purposes (see the Appendix).

Once the participant had accepted the invitation to share her story, I encouraged conversation by using clarifying and confirming questions and statements, such as "How did you feel then?"; "So money is like his last way of controlling you... .."; or "You felt you weren't ready".

It was extremely important to establish rapport with the participants, to create an atmosphere conducive to the sharing of sensitive, often emotional, material. The ease of rapport was facilitated by the fact that I, as the researcher, had experienced the crisis of separation and divorce. The participants knew this, and would often include statements in their stories referring to it; such as "You know what it's like". Riessman (1990) comments that being divorced herself "placed me in more egalitarian relationship with those I was studying and created a greater reciprocity

CHAPTER 4

GAIL

4.1 BACKGROUND

Gail is a 43 year-old mother of two, who had been married for twenty-one years before her divorce. I initially interviewed her in my office, and we had several subsequent meetings to clarify aspects of the interview. At the time of the interview, Gail had been divorced for eighteen months, following an eight-month separation. Her two children, Karen (19) and Mickey (17) were students; Karen studying medicine in Cape Town, and Mickey still at school. She received a small amount of alimony from her ex-husband, Kobus, which was to be discontinued two months after the time of the interview. This income was supplemented by Gail's own work as a landscape gardener. Kobus continued to provide for the children.

On first meeting Gail, I experienced her as a large, confident, outgoing woman; brash and loud, with a wonderful sense of the ridiculous, often erupting into raucous laughter. Her weather-beaten face, mannish haircut, her khaki shorts and tough-looking workers' boots all contributed to the impression of a very physical, outdoor woman, used to hard labour. She sprawled on one end of the couch, cigarette in hand, ready to take on the work of the interview.

4.2 THE JOURNEY

From Gail's perspective, her journey through separation and divorce started about 10 years ago, when Kobus set up a new business and became less interested in his family, "....drifting into a world of his own". By the time Gail "got the wake-up call and realized the marriage was on the rocks, it was too late". Gail had never worked outside of the house during her marriage, and had strongly invested in the lives of her children: "I was always the one watching the kids' sport. He was never there". Kobus held the expectation that that was Gail's 'job', seeing her as a "lady of leisure". It would appear that, indeed, Gail had everything: a successful husband, a comfortable house, two wonderful children and the financial means to stay at home and care for her family; surely the envy of all her friends. Underlying all this, however, was an enduring, echoing emptiness: "I lacked one thing, and that was love". So Gail built up what she called "a false love", making herself believe that everything was fine: "I was giving and receiving love all on my own".

Gail's support during these years came from alcohol: "I drank because I was lonely. I always had lots of friends and enjoyed a good party, but I know that there's more to life. What's more important is intimacy". She described Kobus as "very cold, he was never affectionate .... Kobus never enjoyed kissing. If I tried to hold his hand, he'd pull away". Their sexual relationship had begun to fade a while back; arguments over sex became commonplace. Gail wanted sex and Kobus rejected her with excuses: he was too tired, he had a big cycle race the next day. She stopped asking. "The first sign is when your normal sexual routine changes". Gail strongly suspected that Kobus was having an affair. Her dignity and self-respect were considerably undermined by Kobus's sexual rejection, adding to the distance between them.

As Kobus spent more and more time at work, and they communicated less and less at home, Gail involved herself more deeply in the lives of her children. "Maybe I was too involved with the kids, all the day-to-day stuff, running around after them". The drinking continued: a comfort to Gail, but also a source of vicious, anguished arguments between her and Kobus. Eventually, Gail, in an effort to improve her marriage relationship and to preserve her relationships with her children, gave up drinking. However, not drinking caused her to notice more: "the hours at work were longer, the smell of perfume stronger". Kobus would never admit to having an affair. Gail, though, believed that there was another woman, Elise, who "boosted his ego, made him feel like a million bucks; I was just the nagging housewife when he got home". Their arguments escalated, always revolving around the other woman. Gail felt that all her roles were being usurped by Elise: "everything was shared in the office environment .... I felt cheated out of my life. You've got it all, you work on something for so long - and someone else comes and takes it away".

Some of the reasons Gail gave for the deterioration of her marriage relationship were attributed to external causes: Kobus's over-involvement in his business; the presence of another woman. But at the same time, she questioned her own culpability: *her* dependence on alcohol, *her* over-involvement with the children. The search for explanations was confusing and ambivalent, creating a gradual erosion of the person who Gail believed herself to be: strong, self-sufficient, independent. She became less certain, more needy and self-involved.

4.2.1 Separation

Eventually, Kobus left home for a separation period "to give us each some space. But it didn't work. I didn't like it. But I thought he might come to his senses". Gail

believed that the separation worsened any relationship they might have had; she felt that Kobus had more freedom to indulge in his affair, while Gail herself grew more jealous, insecure and afraid. She suffered from depression. Refusing to believe that her marriage was ending, Gail actively sought help from marriage counsellors, psychologists, psychiatrists and doctors. Kobus would not participate in any of these efforts; he insisted that Gail was the problem.

Gail wanted to rebuild the marriage. She desperately suggested that they move away, get away from everything and start again, hoping that changing the external environment might solve the internal problems. Kobus would not leave "because of the money he'd invested in the new business and he couldn't let his colleagues down. He wasn't prepared to make a move".

During the separation period, meetings held together over lunch or supper would end in tears for Gail. "You can see your whole world crumble in front of you. I was suicidal". She actually threatened suicide several times: "I was trying to scare him". It didn't work - Kobus was angry and, in the end, indifferent. Gail was on anti-depressants for over a year: "I was high all the time". When, ultimately, a doctor put her on an even stronger drug, she decided to stop. "One day, I decided, that's enough, and I stopped the drugs".

"Keeping sane" became increasingly difficult. Volcanoes of emotion built up in Gail over the days and weeks, and erupted more and more frequently, directed at Kobus. These outbursts "showed Kobus what damage he had done; how much he had hurt me. He would say 'I'm not going to put up with this', and walk away. Inside, it was like a bubble had burst". Such outbursts of powerful emotion were followed by feelings of powerlessness and self-doubt: "Perhaps I could have eased off the pressure, not asked him when he was coming home, or where he was going".

I experienced a very real sense of desperation as Gail described this period of separation. She felt strongly that she had tried everything to make the marriage work; she had given up drinking, stopped going out with friends to be at home for Kobus, arranged weekends away (which Kobus would cancel because he was too busy), and done the endless round of marriage counsellors and psychologists.

There was also a picture being painted for me of a woman being torn apart, doing everything she could to rescue her *image* of marriage, but at the same time not wanting the *man* she had married: "At that time, I learnt to hate him". All Gail's energy was being used to sort out a problem that, perhaps, had no solution.

In contrast to the desperate search for a solution was the sense of waiting. "It was a waiting game. I never knew if he'd be coming home the next day or next week. He wouldn't give a deadline". Kobus wanted time out of the marriage in order to come to a decision "but he already knew what he was going to do". Gail believed that he couldn't just leave; he needed an excuse to end the marriage. "If he could hate me, it would be easy for him". Kobus encouraged Gail to drink, "'You'll feel better if you drink'". Beneath the waiting was hope; hope that things would change, hope that the marriage would mend. "I never, ever wanted to get divorced .... But it happened to me and Kobus". Once again, I experienced Gail's powerlessness, the feeling of something happening *to* her, beyond her control.

When her daughter asked "Why did you and Dad get married?", Gail answered: "Because I loved him and he loved me. But people change. They change and you don't notice it in a marriage because you're with it every day. Most people leave it too long. If one person is adamant about divorce, the other must go along with it. Don't hang on. If you hang on, the hurt is worse. Each time you hang on, it's a bigger disappointment in the end".

4.2.2 Support

"No matter what prick you went to, you got the same reaction - we can't solve your problem for you, we can only give you guidance. I got so frustrated. You were crying for help, and they didn't know anything". Gail's experience with professional counsellors left her disillusioned and scornful. They were requiring her to use resources that she simply did not feel she had at the time. This was a deeply lonely time for her, during which she felt adrift and unsupported.

Following disappointment at the hands of the professionals, she approached the minister of her church "without much luck. He seemed to have too many other problems in the parish, like people dying of cancer, deaths. They seemed to be more important than a divorce". This experience compounded Gail's feeling of her own lack of importance that had been created in her relationship with her husband, who also had 'too many other problems'.

"Friends are worth nothing. They're too tied up in their own lives". Bitterness crept into her voice; she felt she had been deserted. The same people who had drank and partied with her were now unavailable. Gail's family was also unsupportive, particularly her mother (who had also been divorced and remarried). "People are scared to support you because they might have to get involved. They might have to

help you financially, or you might pack up everything and move in with them. If my daughter was going through what I was going through, I would be there most of all to listen". Of her three sisters, only the youngest listened and supported. The second sister was also divorced herself but offered no guidance. "This sounds strange, but I got more help from Kobus's mom and dad than from anyone in my family". There was a clear expectation that Gail's own family would support her, which was not met.

However, there were islands of warmth in Gail's cold sea of despair. The Church provided relief: "You could speak, or pray, to someone who could provide the answers. I believe that if you persevere enough you will see the light. You have to believe and get in touch with yourself, admit your marriage isn't going to work. Face facts". Her religion provided the space and strength for Gail to do this. In addition, Gail found solace with other women. "Only other divorced women or a woman who had lost her husband had the time to listen .... Most help comes from someone who's been through it". She received help from these people: "not help that would bring you back on your feet; more of a place you could cry, because you could never share it with the kids".

4.2.3 Recovery

Kobus's eventual reason for leaving the marriage was that "we'd grown apart, had nothing in common any more". Gail had reached a point where "you can't take it any more, all the false hope. You need an end". Finally, they divorced. On the day of the divorce, Gail phoned Elise to say, "You've eventually achieved what you wanted .... you've broken our marriage". She felt that it was important to have made this gesture, although "I still don't know the truth" (about Kobus and Elise's relationship). Gail felt that Elise was "getting away scot-free"; that 'other women' were "not taking the consequences, not feeling the hurt, the anguish. They're getting all the love they need .... They are taking what doesn't belong to them".

The single most difficult thing for Gail in the process, was "letting go". She admitted that she had not yet let go. "The thoughts and feelings will always be with you. A marriage of twenty-one years with kids involved .... there are too many memories to forgive and forget .... I believe it will never leave you.' Gail still felt "very attached" to Kobus; the fact that they both still lived in the same town exacerbated this feeling: "You see him driving past in a car, you see him in the supermarket. You hear people talk about being at the pub and seeing them (Kobus and Elise) there".

There was an ambivalence here; Gail was missing the marriage (or, perhaps, the *idea*

of marriage) but was also resentful of the time she had invested in it: "You just give and give and give, and you don't get anything back .... If I'd known how my marriage was going to turn out, I would never have made the sacrifices that I did".

But "no-one wants to listen to a whining person. So I decided to get into business, fill each day, get on with life and forget about the past". This was easier said than done: "The hardest thing is to let go of the past. The minute you thrive on the past, you are a total wreck. You've got to look at the future. You've got to say 'I will do it', not 'I want to do it'". Gail had gradually regained a view of herself as a strong-minded, self-sufficient woman, and making conscious choices about how she would feel and behave was an important coping mechanism. "At the end you feel so good because you've done something only you wanted to do, not for anyone else. Only *you* have to deal with the consequences".

Gail had deeper relationships with friends since the divorce: "you share and they respond". There was also a sense of being appreciated by other people, which Gail never had in her marriage. "It's important to have a close friend and good friends". Despite Gail's earlier comment about friends being "worth nothing", this was an indication that she had developed strong friendships in the course of her journey, through her growing ability to relate to others as a person in her own right,

For Gail, the greatest benefits resulting from the divorce were "a touch of freedom. Not being hurt any more. Being who you want to be, not being someone else to please your partner. Just being yourself. No pressure." There was a sigh of relief in Gail's voice as she described this. "As an individual, I've grown mentally, in faith, all round .... One thing I learnt from counselling: do for yourself".

4.3   ANALYSIS

One of the aspects not adequately covered in the literature surrounding divorce is the experience of chaos and powerlessness as described by Gail. Perhaps Hackney and Bernard's Dyadic Divorce Adjustment Model comes closest to describing the complex nature of this experience. Gail went through the 'levels' of indecision, emotionalism, reality and renewal, often experiencing them simultaneously, and finding that some of the phases reoccur. The fact that Kobus was experiencing these phases at different times, or in a different order aggravated Gail's feeling of being out of control during the process. For example, Kobus "already knew what he was going to do" i.e. leave the marriage, while Gail was desperately struggling to save the relationship.

Much of Gail's grief emanated from her yearning for reconciliation (Gullo, 1992). At the same time, feelings of chaos surrounded Gail due to the ambivalence she experienced in her desire to maintain the marriage, but also 'hating' Kobus and what he was doing to her (Riessman, 1990). In addition, Gail suffered an enormous loss of self-esteem (Faust, 1987) associated with the rejection she experienced (both sexually and in her role as a wife), and because she was made to feel undesirable due to the presence of the 'other woman'. Gail stated, "I never, ever wanted to get divorced", implying that divorce for her was a failure in an important role (Albrecht, 1980) and contributed to a loss of social identity (Kitson, 1992).

A consequence of the breakdown of Gail's marriage was a drastic change in her lifestyle. She had never worked whilst married, but now had to seek employment. Financially, Gail had been well-provided for in her marriage; she now faced financial constraints and had to move to a smaller house, living on a considerably reduced budget (Miller, Smerglia, Gaudet & Kitson, 1998). These secondary stressors all added to the primary stress of the divorce (Pearlin, 1989).

According to Cutrona and Russell's theory of optimal matching (1990), Gail needed emotional support more than anything else during what was perceived by her to be an uncontrollable event. Gail appreciated the emotional support she received from other divorced or widowed women, describing this support as "a place you could cry", rather than practical support: "not help that would bring you back on your feet". This confirms Lin and Dean's (1984) finding that social support is more likely to be perceived as supportive if the provider has shared values and understandings. Like many others, Gail reported other women as her primary source of emotional support (Duffy & Smith, 1994).

One of the most notable aspects of Gail's experience was her view of herself as self-sufficient. As Nadler (1983) points out, requesting support has implications of vulnerability and failure, and is threatening to the individual's self-concept. Gail may have neglected an important step in coping with crisis, namely, revelation of the problem. Pearlin and McCall (1990) explain that belief in self-sufficiency may inhibit disclosure of a problem. It is possible that Gail did not receive the support she required because she did not request it. In addition, Gail's positive expectations of support in relationships would have been severely disrupted in her marriage relationship, where she felt completely unsupported. So, according to Sarason, Pierce and Sarason (1990), her levels of perceived support would be lower. Gail certainly did not feel that she experienced emotional or esteem support from her friends or family; this could well be associated with her high level of depression (Thabes, 1997). A

further compounding factor is Swann and Brown's (1990) concept of identity support, that is, that people prefer to be with others who support their self-concept. Gail had many friends who saw her as a heavy-drinking party-goer; when she gave up drinking, these people could no longer assist with maintaining a stable self-concept.

The fact that Gail developed new and different friendships through the process, confirms both Nelson's (1995) and Duffy's (1993) observations that social networks fluctuate considerably for a divorced woman. One of the reasons for this is, as Riessman (1990) points out, women "cannot maintain the myth of self-sufficiency ... . and generally intensify their relationships with others" (p. 172).

Gail's sense of isolation and loneliness could perhaps have been alleviated by a temporary community, such as that provided by a support group (Vera, 1993). In addition, there would have been the benefit of meeting others who had experienced the same crisis, and the relief of knowing that she wasn't crazy or alone in her experience (Oygard, Thuen & Solvang, 2000). This feeling of belonging could have been very valuable to Gail who so missed being part of a marriage and a family. Gail was also deeply involved in her own chaos; moving away from her own concerns to help others in a group may well have been therapeutic.

Gail's difficulty in 'letting go' is normal following divorce (Weiss, 1995), and was probably exacerbated by continued communication with Kobus concerning the children and financial issues. Mazor, Batiste-Harel and Gampel (1998) would probably describe Gail's coping pattern as 'semi-integrated'; she was still struggling to integrate and accept the divorce experience. Despite this, Gail appears to have adjusted to divorce in terms of Kitson's (1992) definition: she has a sense of self-esteem and her own identity, and is "relatively free of symptoms of psychological disturbance" (p 20). Gail had also begun to focus on the future rather than dwelling on the past: "You've got to look at the future" (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

In conclusion, it would appear that the process of separation and divorce was an opportunity for personal growth for Gail (Gettleman & Markowitz, 1974): "As an individual, I've grown mentally, in faith, all round". It was also a liberating experience; Gail described the greatest benefit resulting from her divorce as "a touch of freedom .... Just being yourself".

CHAPTER 5

MARY

5.1   BACKGROUND

Mary is a 53 year-old school counsellor and mother of three adult daughters, all of whom live in their own homes. She had been married for twenty three years before her divorce seven years ago. Self-sufficient financially, her ex-husband, Charles, was still contributing to the youngest daughter's education and still owed Mary money according to the divorce agreement.

My most vivid impression of Mary was one of positive serenity; a very enthusiastic, warm human being, with a strong sense of her own identity. This was a woman who knew, and was at ease with, herself. Mary was self-possessed and spoke confidently and with little prompting for much of the interview. Once or twice she became a little tearful and, on occasion, quite vehement when describing her experiences. Towards the end of our conversation, Mary, in some surprise, stated, "I've said things that I didn't even know were there". I interviewed Mary in her office at the school where she worked.

5.2   THE JOURNEY

Mary and her husband, Charles, had been at school together and had dated since Mary was 16 years old. They got married and moved around the country a lot, producing three children by the time Mary was 28. Due to the constant moves for her husband's career, Mary did not pursue a career of her own, "other than just social work for odd periods .... I used the time for studying, adding educational subjects and doing my HED". She also notes that, like many women of her generation, "I had the perception that to be a good mother, you had to be around". However, once Mary obtained her teaching qualification she "got back into teaching part-time at a convent; and I could sort of feel the excitement of where education

was at ... . I was then asked by a high school to set up the computer centre there". Shortly after this, Mary became the school counsellor at the school. Her life was beginning to gain momentum in a meaningful area; I could hear the buzz of enthusiasm in her voice as she described this period to me.

It was at this time, as Mary was getting seriously involved in a new career, "when my youngest, Anne, was in Grade 9, that the carpet was pulled from under me .... He (Charles) suddenly announced that he wanted his space". Mary was "totally and utterly numb". What she did not know at that time was that Charles was "having an affair with a great friend", but "it was only eight months after that that the whole story came out". In fact, "I was made to feel that I was the reason that the marriage couldn't go on". Mary's feelings of loss were intense; throughout the interview, she constantly used the word "rejection".

5.2.1 Separation

Mary and Charles were separated for 2 years before they finally divorced. Mary describes much of this period as a time of "denial", thinking "this isn't going to last; he'll come back ... . I really believed he would come back". She calls it "that bubble period, that vacuum". Numbness, shock and loss characterised her life. This was exacerbated by physical problems: "a breast lump .... I'd just had a hysterectomy before Charles left. I lost weight; I think I weighed about 45 kilograms". A doctor put her onto "something (I can't even remember what it was), and it was awful". Then her brother, a GP, prescribed Prozac for her, which helped somewhat.

But even Prozac could not buffer Mary through the experience of finding out about Charles's affair. "I remember being devastated by what everyone was talking about, and I being the last to find out. I felt more devastated than angry". Her sense of betrayal and humiliation was in her voice. "I had always, perhaps naively, believed that people were basically good. I never, ever believed that this sort of deception took place amongst friends". What *did* make Mary angry was when the

than is customary in interviews" (p. 226).

Several of the women commented on the cathartic, almost therapeutic nature of the interview; e.g. "Thank you. I'm sure I'm going to probably feel good ... . I've said things that I didn't even know were there" and "I feel so relieved to have said all this".

The audio-tapes were transcribed in full immediately after the interview. In the event that the material was unclear or ambiguous, I either met with the participant or contacted her telephonically to clarify the data.

The original transcripts of the interviews are available on request.

3.5   TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE DATA

'Reliability' refers to the extent to which questioning yields the same answers whenever and wherever it is done. When the interview is conceived of as an opportunity for the construction of meaning, one "cannot expect replication of answers because they emerge from different circumstances of production" (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 9). Thus, the trustworthiness of the data could only be evaluated by the participants themselves. Each transcript and final story was given to the participant to read and to verify. Any changes made by the participant were included in the final story.

3.6   ANALYSIS

The stories produced by each of the women were scripted from the original transcripts of the interviews. The transcripts were paraphrased, using the women's own words, indicated by quotation marks. It was essential that each woman should produce her own story, to speak on her own behalf, with as little interference as possible.

Each story was divided into sections, commencing with a short background to the participant's circumstances. The story of the journey travelled in the process of separation and divorce included a brief description of their marriage; their experience of separation, support during this period, and recovery. Major themes in the stories were identified and included at the end of each individual's story.

Combining the information provided by the five stories, a clear picture emerged of what constituted social support for these women and how they each gauged their post-divorce adjustment.

3.7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In dealing with a highly sensitive matter such as divorce, it is important that the participants are assured that their information will be handled in an ethical manner. Thus, each participant gave informed consent to the inclusion of their material into the study, having been told the nature and purpose of the research. They were also told that all information would remain confidential, and that their anonymity would be protected by changing their names in the final product. In addition, each participant gave permission to have their interviews audio-taped. They also received a copy of their own original transcript and their story.

other woman's husband "started to pop up at every opportunity". She eventually "got a close friend to go and say, 'Please, just back off'". Being sought out by this man was, in Mary's view, a situation which added insult to injury.

Charles had been the "dominant person" in their relationship. "He liked to control things and I adored him, and I was happy with that .... In our relationship, I so looked up to him in terms of his intellect and what he'd achieved that I didn't acknowledge my role in the relationship....". Mary had been left without a clear sense of her own identity, of who she was. "I had never been given the opportunity to control my own life". Charles's need for dominance was one of the ways in which Mary explained the break-up of her marriage: "I did my social work; it was no problem if I was quietly going off to the psychiatric hospital and talking to Napoleon's wife .... getting R300 a month .... that's not even a cash flow". But when Mary's career became a major aspect of her life, she suspected that Charles felt his dominant position in the relationship was threatened: "I don't think that fitted into his reckoning".

One of the areas in which Charles had been particularly dominant was their financial situation. "The one regret I have is that I wasn't better equipped for the world of finance ... . I didn't have an understanding or control of my own destiny financially .... It was the first time I'd had to budget". This was a challenging time for Mary.

She dwelt obsessively on her circumstances, and often thought "I wonder if there's ever going to be a time when for one day I won't think about it. Do I have to go through life obsessed with this thought of what had happened? What used to go through my mind every day was 'when will I get to a place ....?'" I had a picture of Mary going through the motions of daily life: raising her daughter, cooking meals, running her home; but her head was bursting with questions, recriminations, blame and hope. There was a feeling of uncontrollable mental activity, while physical activity continued, almost on a different level of consciousness.

However, an important "survival mechanism" through this emotionally troubled

time, was Mary's career. "I was totally focused on that. I flourished in my job. It was unbelievable. I got two TED merits, I think, in one year." It was almost as though Mary had two lives: the dedicated teacher and counsellor at school, and the obsessive, floundering abandoned wife at home.

5.2.2 Support

An important factor in Mary's experience of separation was that she was "not someone who *needs* lots of people. I can honestly say I don't think I've experienced loneliness … . I've never felt alone. I *love* my own company and books and music". Although Mary attributed this to an internal, personality trait, it could also be explained by the extensive support that she received during this period: "a support network came into place that I don't think I was even aware of".

Firstly, Mary's family were very supportive: "My family, extended family, are very, very close .... They just wanted to pack the two of us up (Mary and Anne) and wanted us down in Durban. I've got an incredible extended family, they're not possessive … . I think supportive is the word. My brothers flew up, and even my great friend from Durban flew up. I look back and that's what I remember". The relationship with her family, though, also exacerbated feelings of anger towards Charles: "One of my feelings along the way was anger, well resentment, that my family had really opened their home to him in *so* many ways, and that it was almost a betrayal of them as well".

Friends "rallied around". Charles and Mary had been members of Round Table, "and our Round Table support unit came right behind me and the girls .... The reaction was unbelievable support". Mary believed that one of the reasons for this was that "the truth (about Charles's affair) had been withheld .... And I was amazed at how strongly people in our social group react to deceptions, infidelity … . The reaction was based on values totally against that". This type of support, assuring Mary of her own blamelessness, was very valuable at that time.

Mary's sense of herself as a real person in her own right was enhanced, not only by this reaction, but also by other friends: "Friends, too, were unbelievably supportive. I think, for the first time, in spite of this terrible feeling of rejection, I realised what people were saying to me .... I realised th at actually *I* was perhaps the person in the relationship that friends enjoyed being with ... . People said it to me". Mary has a great appreciation for the support she received during her separation: "I just couldn't get over the support. It was really overwhelming. I really felt carried. I had one friend who would phone every morning at seven, and for me that support was incredible ... . I think that that helped me a lot". Mary and her daughters were invited to join other families on holiday, for example; "So in terms of holidays, friends, and socially, I was busy".

Colleagues at school also offered support: ".... the support I had from colleagues there was tangible". A psychologist with whom Mary worked offered formal counselling and Mary "went to her about three times". She had no recollection of whether or not this had been helpful, but Mary felt that she had had "very good (informal) counselling support" from her many friends. Another source of more formal support came from Mary's GP, "who was a friend and a woman ... . She was, I think, a counsellor for me, as well as (helpful) on the physical side".

One of the less supportive aspects of her friends' behaviour that Mary experienced, was that "they introduced odd people (men), and it just made me cringe. I thought, 'No, I don't think I'll ever get to that point again'. Clearly, she was not ready to risk a new relationship at this early stage in her journey. In fact, Mary stated, "I think I'm only *now* beginning to feel that if I meet someone, that a relationship would be OK .... It's a long time .... I believe I have evolved as a person .... I needed that time". The timing of support is a very important element. "There were often things said that I found irritating .... people who insisted how they felt I should be, or where they felt I should be; especially to start with, when I really believed that he'd come to his senses. I used to resent that. I hated people to counsel me in that 'this was it, this was finished', because I didn't think it would be. I can see in hindsight that you get there, but you don't tell a person that".

5.2.3 Recovery

"Gradually, and I think it *is* time, I got to a point where I could think, 'Gosh, this issue hasn't clouded me very much today'. I would still say I thought about it every day". Slowly, Mary's pain receded. "Now I've got to a point where I know I wouldn't change what I have now and go back".

Mary measured her progress by her own personal growth and, perhaps even more important to her, the functionality of her family unit. "With my daughters, I would say we're an incredibly functional family .... We get on like houses on fire, have wonderful fun .... I think that really hit home last year when my daughter got married. The three girls sat me down and said they all wanted to thank me for what I'd been through, because they didn't believe that any of the four of us would be the people that we are, had we not gone through that". Mary is immensely proud of her daughters: "what they've achieved as young women. They've achieved incredibly, you know, at university and in their lives now ... . It does make you, as a mum, feel you've done it okay .... I'm incredibly proud of them".

Regarding her personal growth, Mary feels that "what I've managed to do is jump the generation gap in a sense, in terms of a woman's role .... I've tried to help them (the daughters) see that, as a woman, you have every right to be your own person, to achieve your potential ... . I think relationships are healthier if two people are two separate elements. And for me, at my time of growing up, that was not the case .... I can look at friends now, and I actually pity some because they are never going to know who they are, and their worth, and their potential". There was a soaring sense of a woman who had come through great pain to a deeper understanding of herself, a confidence that she could cope with whatever came along. "Where I'm at is a fantastic place! .... I can say that I've got to a really good place". Another milestone for Mary was when, after seven years at her high school, she was "head-hunted" for a position at a new, prestigious girls' independent school in another city; "So I really got out of my comfort zone .... It was exciting ... . I didn't ever feel nervous (about taking the new position)".

Despite this, Mary realised that "there are still going to be *issues*, because there is the pain there that doesn't go away". She described this as "rawness". For example, "When my father was so ill and died, Charles didn't even pick up the phone or contact me or my mum .... Then I thought, 'Am I really over him?', but I suppose I am", she laughed quietly. Another 'raw' spot is Charles's second wife (whose name Mary never mentioned): "I've often thought about this whole forgiveness thing, but I also feel that I would be a hypocrite ... . To have a relationship with her would be totally hypocritical". This aspect of Mary's journey was highlighted at the time her daughter got married. "I wondered how I was going to cope emotionally, what sort of buttons that was going to press". Ultimately, though, the daughters persuaded their father not to bring his second wife. Mary was "delighted .... I think it would have placed such a strain". I got the sense that Mary still needed to work through her feelings about her relationship with the 'other woman'; this is still 'raw' in that the wound has not completely healed.

In terms of continued attachment to Charles, Mary felt that the last hold, or control, he had over her was financial: "To this day, the maintenance, which is really very little, has never been increased. He insists on depositing it himself and will put it in from the beginning of the month to the 7th of the month; when he feels like it. And I have now, in that area, a sense of anger. I find it totally unacceptable and irritating ... . I will *never*, ever stop saying he has a responsibility. He's done all sorts of things ... . I won't go into all the things he's done to control, to hold back, to do as little as he can financially, and to hide moneys .... I think the unfinished business that irritates the hell out of me is the finances". Mary felt very strongly about this, repeating this theme several times throughout the interview. However, "I recently went to the lawyer, because he still owes me money for the house we sold, which he now doesn't want to pay. And I said 'I want you (the lawyer) to make sure that everything that is owed to me, I get' ... . This has also been quite a milestone ... . So I've actually got to that point". Of Charles, Mary said "I just find it unbelievable that he isn't able to just work that out amicably. It's the last hold, I think". Apart from this lingering attachment, Mary's financial situation was a source of very real concern to her: "The one fear that I have every now and then, that hits me almost like a clamp, is my future security".

Mary was still exploring many aspects of her experience of divorce, such as how she felt when her daughters left home: "My family were concerned when it got to the point that the girls were starting to move off and, actually, it happened at a good time. I feel you can have your children with you for so long, and then they need to move off. So that hasn't affected me. In fact, I've heard of more friends who are still married going into severe depression for empty-nest syndrome. And I don't. I have not once. Which is an interesting thing, I haven't ever thought about it until I've said it now. I've got my own purpose. I'm not doing it through them. And I wonder, if the separation had never come about, how I would feel".

In conclusion, Mary said "I don't think there is anything I would change .... And I wouldn't make different decisions". As a description of her journey, Mary declared, "It's a *job*, it's a step-by-step job".

5.3   ANALYSIS

In retrospect, Mary saw the process of separation and divorce as a series of 'stages'. She describes the initial feelings of numbness and shock; followed by denial, the "bubble period, that vacuum", acceptance, and, finally, autonomy and renewal. Although there was great pain during the process, Mary clearly saw herself ultimately at "a point where I know I wouldn't change what I have now and go back .... I can say that I've got to a really good place". This loosely corresponds with Gullo's (1992) description of the emotional course of the divorce process. Mary's "denial" was based on hope that her marriage would be rebuilt; this tantalising promise of reconciliation is a major source of the grief experienced by divorced people. A further disruptive factor for Mary was the loss of self (Haber, 1992). As she pointed out, her sense of self was very tied up in the 'common self' formed by her marriage to Charles. However, divorce provided Mary with an opportunity for personal growth, to discover her identity, and to formulate new roles as a career person and single mother. This supports Gettleman and Markowitz's (1974) view that divorce may be a liberating experience for women.

There were many positive outcomes for Mary, including a successful career, which might not have been possible if she had remained in her marriage. She had obtained a sense of her own identity and self-worth, confirmed by her friends and by her achievements in her career. Perhaps most importantly, Mary had control over her own life: self-determination and a sense of purpose independent of her daughters and of her ex-husband.

In contrast to Gail, Mary seemed to have expectations of positive regard and acceptance from others, and therefore experienced higher levels of perceived social support (Sarason, Pierce & Sarason, 1990). Her description of her family as "very, very close ... . supportive" suggests that her self-conception in terms of relationships was relatively positive and stable. Mary's friends assisted in maintaining this self-conception by offering identity support, by assuring her that it was she they enjoyed being with (Swann & Brown, 1990). In addition, Mary felt supported and validated by friends who saw her as blameless in the divorce situation, thus confirming her eventual definition of the divorce as correct (Kunz & Kunz, 1995).

An interesting aspect of Mary's experience is that she felt she received support from families and couples, as well as from other women and colleagues. It would appear that she had a dense network of support, perhaps contributing to a more positive sense of well-being (Gallo, 1982). Within her network, Mary's ability to express herself enabled friends, family and colleagues to support her in appropriate ways. Due to her ability to immerse herself in her career, she probably presented herself as coping adequately enough not to distress potential supporters (Silver, Wortman & Crofton, 1990).

On the whole, it seems that Mary received appropriate support. Her family and the friend who phoned every day provided emotional support; the families who invited her to join them on holiday provided tangible support; and esteem/identity support was provided by friends who perceived her as enjoyable to be with. In terms of Cutrona and Russell's theory of optimal matching (1990), Mary's network provided

flexible support that was relevant to the varying situations in which she found herself during the process of divorce. One area that was lacking was informational support. Mary felt unprepared and unskilled to deal with finances, and may have benefited from support in this area, particularly as her financial situation was still of great concern to her many years after her divorce.

However, not all of the support Mary received was perceived as useful. For example, friends introducing her to men, or advising her to accept that her marriage was over. This seems to be an issue of timing, as Mary acknowledged that she eventually got to the point of acceptance, but was not ready to be *told* to accept it at that time. This would appear to support Cutrona and Russell's theory that support needs to be matched to the situation.

Mary clearly felt very supported throughout her experience: "I really felt carried". She probably would not have benefited greatly from a support group as her levels of perceived social support were very high. Her career as a school counsellor provided the opportunity for her to avoid self-obsession, at least during working hours; and it was possibly therapeutic for her to assist others with their problems (Norberry, 1986).

CHAPTER 6

ESTELLE

6.1 BACKGROUND

Estelle is a trim, grey-haired 57 year-old woman. Neat, with quick, youthful movements, she talked at high speed during the interview, with lots of emphasis, colourful language and large gestures. I interviewed at her home on a small-holding just outside Johannesburg, where she lives with her quadriplegic daughter. Two other children live in their own homes, one nearby and one abroad. She has one grandchild and, on the day that I interviewed her, was awaiting news from the hospital on the birth of her second! The three children are from Estelle's first marriage, which dissolved when the children were very young. She remarried, and was in this relationship ten years prior to her divorce nine years ago (when she was 48).

Estelle had worked for several years in a marketing company, but had recently returned to primary school teaching. She and her paralysed daughter, Sarah, had experienced a traumatic incident when they were held up and robbed in their home a few months previously; as a consequence of this, Estelle was quite edgy and nervous: "I just can't get over it ... . I can't believe that I'm so tense at night. But even during the day ... .if I'm alone with Sarah, I'm always looking up and down, checking if there's someone in the garden".

6.2 THE JOURNEY

Estelle and her husband, Peter, enjoyed an active social life, which Estelle organised. "We went on so many holidays, and nice holidays. I used to plan and he would just say, 'Ja, let's go' .... We used to have so many people at weekends over for a braai – sit under the trees and have a braai, or late in the evening when it was still safe, sit outside in summer and chat and laugh and joke ... . We were very

sociable. Peter I used to go out a lot".

It appeared that Estelle was generally 'in charge' in the relationship, particularly regarding financial matters. This had been a source of considerable concern to her during the marriage: "He was a worry to live with because he was *so* irresponsible .... He wouldn't pay the phone bill and they'd cut us off; he wouldn't pay the electricity". As well as the home finances, Estelle took over Peter's personal finances: "When I first met Peter (this is all part of his irresponsibility), he had a cheque book and he'd write out cheques left, right and centre. And they'd all bounce. And when I married him, I couldn't stand this business that he had this overdraft. I actually worked damned hard at this person. I mean, it was hard work. I actually cut up his cheque book. I got him to open a cash card account at the time, and everything was on cash. I mean, he had an account at the bottle store ... . A *booze* account!"

Estelle became the 'parent', ensuring that Peter was cared for: "He never had a medical aid all his life, because he works for himself .... I put him on my medical aid. We had insurance policies for him and all that kind of stuff". Estelle described her role as caretaker: "It's *worse* than having another child; at least your children listen to you. I always used to say, 'This is my first-born' .... Mock, you know, with friends. 'This is my first-born, my eldest son, and there are my other kids'. This is not what Estelle had expected of marriage. Her father had been "a farmer, physically strong .... The man of the house". She wanted her husband to be the leader or, at the very least, to share in the responsibility. This disappointment ultimately resulted in a slow drift apart, gradually doing less and less together.

When asked why she thought her marriage had broken up, Estelle was very succinct: "He had another woman. She was sociable ... . A drinker. I could see it coming. We were different in the things we enjoyed, different values. There were lots of arguments. I threw him out".

6.2.1 Separation

When Peter left, Estelle was alone. Two of her children were overseas and the third was married. "So I was very alone. I'm not a loner by nature, so for me to sit alone and not go out, and not socialize ... . I didn't enjoy being by myself *at all*". Estelle tried to get out: "I used to visit my friends, and go out with the work guys; we used to play tennis and I played golf with them. But what *always* used to get me was you go to this place alone and you come back alone. There's no company. When you get into the house it's all quiet, you've got nobody to talk to. I really missed chatting and I missed travelling somewhere and chatting in the car ... . You know, this *lonely* trip". Estelle repeatedly stated that she "did get used to the idea, but I *still* didn't like it. I still went wherever I did go on my own, and came back on my own, but I actually didn't enjoy it". Estelle was going through the motions of socialising, but underlying this was a deep loneliness, a need for companionship.

This sense of being alone was even elicited by seeing other people together: "I used to come back from work and see these people with their caravans going towards the dam (not that I want to go to the dam in a caravan!), but I *knew* they were going away for the weekend or the holidays. And you could see the husband, and the wife, and the kids. I didn't like it. I used to cry in the beginning". Estelle missed being 'a family' and found it difficult to adjust to her role as a single woman.

Estelle had been insulted and angered by Peter leaving her for another woman. "I was so angry with him. Insulted ... I actually said to him, 'I always feel that if a person leaves someone for another person, please just let that person be better. Better type of a person, better class of a person,' I said. 'But *this* person... .!' ... . I knew her from before; she is a *total* slut, she's a drinker, and you know, she's just common, she's so common. And I said to him, 'I cannot believe how you are insulting me'. If it was someone that I could think, ja well no fine, she's better than me, that's okay, but this absolute piece of *rubbish*". "I just remember I was angry for a long time in the beginning. I was really angry. But mostly because of that person". Estelle never gave "that person" a name during our interview.

In the early stage of the separation, Estelle had hoped to save her relationship: "Right in the beginning I still said to him, 'Look, can't we go to counselling and can't we try again'. And then after that, I actually decided, she or whoever else could actually have him. Because I could never trust him again. If he said to me he's going to work, I didn't know if he was going to visit that one or that one or that one. And if I can't trust anybody, that's me, I'm finished". So Estelle moved quickly through the 'hopeful' stage, and was soon adamant that she did not want Peter back in her life.

This, however, did not lessen Estelle's feelings of rejection and anger. "In the beginning, when I did see that woman, at the supermarket, crossing the road somewhere, I actually wanted to ram into her in the car". Part of the reason for Estelle's anger was that "I really felt *humiliated*. Because a lot of people know me and know her. We belonged to the same Lions' Club. In fact, that's where we all met. And everyone knew".

When Estelle had "bad days", she would "cry, weep. But I didn't want to cry at night because the next morning you've got to go to work, you look terrible. You've got *those* eyes". Much of her behaviour during this time was directed at maintaining her image of a "strong person", who was coping well. "Weekends were good; then I could cry because I didn't care what I looked like when I went to the Spar or wherever. But not to work, because you have to try and look a little bit presentable ... . Often on the way to work, I'd just get very weepy, but not cry so much that you look like a spook. There were times when you just feel 'Oh, man, when is this just going to end?' You do get a day or so when you feel like that .... I mean, I probably looked like shit .... I felt terrible".

Although Estelle was financially independent at this time, "I was still working, so I was OK. I'd got my own car", the smallholding was a considerable burden: "the electricity, and the maintenance". Staff had to be paid. After Sarah's accident in which she was paralysed, Sarah came back to live with her mother. Estelle had to have someone to provide constant care for Sarah, and alter the house to

accommodate a wheelchair.

In addition to the financial problems, practical issues also had to be addressed: "Like if something breaks. Look, I can change a globe and stuff like that. But hell, to this day I can't change a plug, and I'm too scared to learn in case I still make a mess of the wires. You know, funny things. The toilet won't flush. Those things. I keep thinking to myself, I wish I was a man. I wish I would just do these things and I don't need anybody to help me".

6.2.2 Support

Estelle considered her job a great source of support during this period. "I would definitely, *definitely* say the fact that I was working, and that I didn't have to sit at home and think and mope. I had to get up and I had to go to work. I think that helped a lot". An important aspect of this was that "When I started at my new job, very few people knew" about her separation. She was able to present another persona to her colleagues.

Her greatest support, though, was her friends. "We'd do a lot of things together. We'd go away for weekends, or I'd go to them for the weekend. Or go on holiday. We'd all go together and do things over weekends, like go to a movie maybe, or go shopping, or go for coffee". This partially fulfilled Estelle's need for socialisation. But "not completely. After all, we still have to come home, and it's quiet and empty". Apart from the social factor, the friends were always available for Estelle to talk to, "*especially* when I was still angry. Every little story I would hear via the grapevine about him and her, I would *immediately* tell them, and gloat a little bit. They were, like, on my side". The friends reassured Estelle of her own righteousness in the situation. These were "*wonderful*, life-long friends, from birth virtually. These particular friends, they're all sisters. Our mothers met in Grade One. We've been friends since childhood. And we all went to college together, and we all went through our different stories: kids' births and everything together. And we've always just been there for each other. Like fifty years. It's a long time

to be friends. And you can, in fact, phone them in the middle of the night and say 'Look, this is what's happened'". The fact that these women had shared so much history enabled Estelle to reveal her emotions with them, to be her "real self".

Estelle said that she was "very close to my sister. She visits backwards and forwards ... . More social again; you know, meet for coffee or meet for the movies, or visit for weekends". Perhaps a limitation of her sister's support was that "she's a softie, and she's always liked Peter, because he's a very likeable person".

Estelle also went to church; "I think that helped me a hell of a lot. When I read the Bible I would now read about forgiveness and that, which *really* helped me because up until the time when was still so angry, and I would think all these things, like I'd ram into her with my car and stuff. And then it took me a long time. Because you know you've got to say 'I forgive them and then I will be forgiven and my prayers will be answered'. But to actually *get* to it .... And then *one* night I decided this is it. And I actually prayed and I said 'OK, fine, now I forgive them for everything they've done to me, all the hurt and all the pain. And just help me now". And after that, I must be honest, it was just ... . That's why I'm fine, even with her. I haven't got this grudge, or bitterness, or anything. And *that*, I'm sure, helped me so much. It really, really worked". Estelle discovered a practical application for her religious belief that provided a turning point in her journey.

6.2.3 Recovery

Estelle's divorce went through nine months after she and Peter first separated. "It was very irritating that it carried on so long". "My sister went to court with me .... I'd never been to court before! I probably couldn't find my own way into Jo'burg any more! We went for coffee afterwards. The actual divorce was not an emotional event".

Estelle certainly did not bear a grudge towards Peter. In fact, after the burglary that she and Sarah endured, it was Peter and his new wife who would come to sleep at

the house every night. This was not the woman that Peter had left Estelle for, though. Estelle has a good relationship with his new wife: "It's funny how it's worked out, but she is the one ... . For the last two months, she's been sleeping with us very night because I refuse to stay alone. He did come in the beginning, and then *we* kicked him out, because he complains: the TV's too soft; we talk too much in between".

"He's a pain in the butt. But I'm not angry with him any more. It's a long time, nine years down the line. I phone him and ask him things, like 'can you send a guy to come and help fix this or that?' And I feel absolutely nothing for him. I've realised that for me I'm *far* better off without him". Without Peter, Estelle had "peace of mind. I'm only responsible for my own life".

Estelle was proud of the fact that she had come through this period without relying on drugs or alcohol: "And the same thing when Peter left. I didn't take to drink or drugs or sleeping pills for anything. It makes me feel good to know that I can do it". In some ways, Estelle was living up to other peoples' perception of her. "My friends' and family's motto for me is, 'Don't worry about Estelle, she can cope'".

Sometimes, though Estelle would think "just maybe I'm not coping". This was emphasised by the burglary, which made Estelle realise that perhaps living on the smallholding alone was no longer suitable. "I was quite okay with staying here, and I loved staying here. But maybe, when I look back, I should have probably decided to sell the place and find something smaller. You know, the place was too big and the money wasn't enough".

Estelle was still lonely: "I have people for lunch or something, and *maybe* supper, hardly ever. Not where you invite a whole group of friends. I actually can't afford to have a big crowd over". But it was not simply the financial aspect of entertaining: "I'm actually embarrassed to have people around. I'm not really a person that cares too much about what people think, but I've almost lost interest. I actually don't really want people to come here because nothing works. So I've

basically lost a bit of interest in my house as such. Because I can't make as nice as I'd like to make it". The house was a mill-stone around Estelle's neck, and was the one thing that she said she would have done differently through the process of separation and divorce: "What I *should* have done was sell the property and move on".

6.3   ANALYSIS

A major theme in Estelle's story is that of loneliness. The role of social support in alleviating loneliness is not well-documented in the literature, yet for Estelle this was a very important aspect of support. She missed the companionship of marriage, as well as the social identity that comes with being one of a couple (Kitson, 1992). In Estelle's case, it appeared that she had not lost her sense of self, but rather her sense of herself as half of a couple: "You go to this place alone and you come back alone". Her journey to recovery had to include adjusting to the role of a single woman. Estelle compared herself with 'complete' families and grieved for what she had lost: "You could see the husband, and the wife, and the kids .... I used to cry in the beginning". This could well have been exacerbated by her 'mothering' relationship with her ex-husband, as she lost not only a companion, but someone who needed her care and concern.

Estelle had a higher differentiation of self than, for example, Mary (Haber, 1992). She saw herself as a person separate from her husband. Thus, although she was "humiliated" by the loss of wifely status and "insulted" by Peter's choice of partner, I felt that Estelle retained her sense of self.

There was also ambivalence in Estelle's response to separation (Riessman, 1990); although she missed Peter, it was a relief to be free of his irresponsibility: "He was a worry to live with because he was *so* irresponsible". It would appear that Estelle's expectations of the marriage relationship had never been adequately met in her relationship with Peter; thus, much of her grief was for the lost image and status of marriage rather than for the loss of Peter himself.

Estelle's anger was largely directed at the 'other woman': "I actually wanted to ram into her in the car". This corresponds to Gullo's (1992) stage of 'blame'. Peter was also blamed, but the root of Estelle's anger towards him was that she felt insulted because of the *type* of person with whom he had joined. Estelle did not hope for reconciliation for long. She was the only woman who emphasised the issue of trust. As soon as she felt she could no longer trust Peter, she could let go: "I .... decided she .... cou ld have him. Because I could never trust him again".

Estelle was very concerned about how others perceived her. It was important to her to maintain an image of a strong, coping individual. For example, Estelle would not cry at work, but "weekends were good; then I could cry". It is likely that Estelle had a very good coping self-presentation (Silver, Wortman & Crofton, 1990), enabling people to support her. However, this could also have had a negative effect; as Estelle pointed out, her friends and family's motto is "Don't worry about Estelle, she can cope". It is possible that Estelle did not always receive the support she required because the people around her believed she was coping.

Apart from the primary stress of divorce, Estelle had considerable secondary stressors (Pearlin, 1989). The large financial responsibility of maintaining the small-holding was a heavy burden. Even more burdensome was the complete change in lifestyle that occurred after Sarah's accident. Estelle had been used to living with only her ex-husband, and then started to adjust to living alone. Suddenly, she had to revert to the role of mother to her quadriplegic daughter, who required intensive care. As Riessman (1990) points out, divorced women with children experience more stress than those without children. In Estelle's case, the stress was magnified by the physical and emotional demands of a severely disabled child.

A major source of support for Estelle was her job: "I had to get up and I had to go work". One of the important functions of social support is the re-establishment of routines (Kitson, with Holmes, 1992); Estelle's job and her colleagues assisted her in this way. At work, Estelle also felt that she had to maintain her image of a

'coping' person, and perhaps did not elicit direct support. However, the fact that "very few people knew" about her divorce, meant that Estelle did not feel the loss of social status so acutely in that environment.

It was almost as if Estelle had two personas: one that she presented at work, and another that she presented to her friends. The friends, who had a long history with Estelle, offered emotional support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). To a degree, they also provided companionship. The density of Estelle's support network was high, with much mutual linkage among individuals. This seemed to contribute to Estelle's experience of support (Gallo, 1982). In addition, Estelle felt that her friends confirmed the correctness of her behaviour in the divorce process: "they were ... . on my side", and this was supportive (Kunz & Kunz, 1995). Like Mary, Estelle had a strong sense of perceived support during this time.

In terms of her relationship with her former spouse, Estelle seemed to have integrated the divorce experience as part of her life (Mazor, Batiste-Harel & Gampel, 1998). Forgiveness is a very important aspect of this integration. Estelle described the spiritual experience that enabled her to forgive Peter and the 'other woman': "And after that ... . I haven't got this grudge, or bitterness, or anything". Estelle, alone among the participants in this study, was able to maintain a working relationship with Peter after the divorce. One explanation for this might be that Peter was no longer with the woman for whom he had left Estelle.

Unlike some of the other participants, the divorce experience for Estelle was not a particularly liberating experience. There were other factors which possibly contributed to this, such as Estelle's quadriplegic daughter returning home. Instead of being freed to explore her own personal growth as a single person, Estelle was forced back into the role of mother.

It is doubtful whether a formal divorce support group would have alleviated Estelle's feelings of loneliness as this seemed to be strongly associated with her home environment. Estelle's deep, long-term relationships with her friends provided a great deal of emotional support. However, it is possible that Estelle

would have benefited from being a member of a temporary community in which others were experiencing the same thing (Oygard, Thuen & Solvang, 2000). This may have enabled her to integrate the divorce experience by, perhaps, allowing her to explore her perception of herself as self-sufficient.

CHAPTER 7

DEIDRE

7.1 BACKGROUND

I initially interviewed Deidre in her home in a smart Johannesburg suburb. Deidre is a 59 year-old woman who had been separated from her husband for three and a half years, after a marriage of twenty-five years. She has two sons, one of whom lives with her "part-time" during university holidays. The other son lives with her ex-husband, Richard, but only when he returns to Johannesburg from his job in Namibia. Deidre received a divorce settlement from her husband, and he continued to support the sons financially. She had recently started working in a hotel in Johannesburg; this was the first job she had had since she married.

Deidre was very eager to talk about her divorce experience and displayed a great deal of emotion during the interview; she wept, became angry, and also had flashes of humour. An interesting point I noted was that she would, on occasion, talk about herself in the third person, as in "Deidre's marriage break-up ....", almost as if she was talking about somebody else. She also related many conversations verbatim, which made her story lively and immediate. I experienced her as an articulate, sensitive person, whose pain was still very much in evidence. Despite this hurt, I felt that Deidre was an immensely dignified woman, who had taken control of her own destiny.

7.2 THE JOURNEY

Richard and Deidre had what Deidre described as "a good marriage with limitations". Richard travelled a great deal on business and spent long hours at work. In retrospect, Deidre suspected that she "didn't demand enough. So he learnt to give less and less and less. And in the end, well, it didn't matter. I didn't need him any more". One of the reasons Deidre gave for the break-up of the

marriage relationship was that "perhaps he needed to be more needed .... Perhaps that was one of my faults, that I didn't *need* him enough. I could always manage". Richard was a very successful businessman; Deidre stayed at home and looked after the children; they were financially very well off. But Deidre admitted that the process of separation started "before Richard left". Four months before Richard left, Deidre had told a close friend that she suspected "that Richard was having an affair with Joan and that he was going to leave".

7.2.1 Separation

When Richard eventually told Deidre that he was leaving and "wanted to go and live with Joan", Deidre tried to persuade him to "work at it; let's get some help, and be patient. We can both work at it and we'll come through it". She felt that this was just another obstacle to be overcome in their marriage: "The fact that he was having an affair didn't surprise me at all. It wasn't the first .... and I almost wasn't surprised when he told me that it was Joan. The fact that he left shook me". There had been no discussion or negotiation: "We'd never spoken of it before; we'd never said 'this is not a great marriage'". It seemed that "the decision was made ... And I think that by then he felt committed, he couldn't lose face". For a "couple of days" Deidre thought that she could still rescue the situation. But, "when I saw the determination that he really was going, I knew that was it. And I said to him right then, 'But Richard, if you decide to go, believe me, you're going and you're not coming back'. I was uncompromising about it". This was the way in which Deidre could maintain her dignity and self-respect; she had to stand firm and not beg or plead with Richard.

Richard, however, did not leave home immediately after his announcement. "I knew for about two and half weeks that he was going. I also knew that he wouldn't go before we'd had a big business event at home. We had fifty people for dinner. Those two and half weeks were .... were black. I operated on battery, with no emotion at all". This was a bleak and lonely time for Deidre: "I told my sister, who didn't believe me, and I never said a word to the boys". So Deidre saw the

dinner party through, in her misery, pain and loneliness. Before Richard physically packed his bag and walked out of the house, Deidre insisted that he tell his sons that he was leaving: "If Richard wanted to leave, he had to tell his children *himself* .... we'll do this as a family, because we will *forever* be a family, whether you and I live together or not. There will always be the bond of the four of us". This was very difficult for Richard, "he cried and cried and cried. There was enormous pain. I knew he was going, but I was absolutely stony to his pain ... . I was just an observer. He had to suffer it, and his boys had to see and deal with it". It seemed that Deidre needed Richard to experience some of the hurt that she was bearing. "I just watched .... Until it was all over, then I cried".

The most important source of Deidre's pain was "the rejection. That I was deemed no longer good enough. I was put on the rubbish dump .... I was thrown out. The fact that he left doesn't make any difference. But that's what really shook me, that he'd now reached a point where I was no longer good enough for him". To add to this feeling of being "thrown out", Richard "actually asked if I would move out of the house and Joan could move in, and I said, 'No, no, that wouldn't work'". It sounded like such a tight, controlled little response to an enormously impertinent, insulting request.

Once Richard had left, Deidre had to cope with her son, William (who was still at school), their home, and the finances. "I didn't know if I'd manage financially. I didn't know if I would manage physically - a house and a garden and all that .... But could Deidre cope? Yes. I'd had very hard teenage years, and I know that I'm an emotional coper ... . I can cope with *anything*". A major way in which Deidre coped was to take control of the divorce proceedings: "I was in charge. I always met him (Richard) on neutral ground. I chose the time and the venue. In fact, we always met at the Country Club because it's conducive to good behaviour. There can be no screeching and shouting in the lounge of the Country Club. For the first time in my life, I was in charge of Richard ... . And even our divorce agreement that took a long time to work through, it was all on my terms". This gave Deidre a great sense of personal power. Even regarding the division of their possessions,

Deidre controlled what was to happen: "You can have what *I* see fit. I'll read your list, I'll choose what I'll send you". However, as Deidre noted, "The punishment for me is that I now have things that I don't want!"

Emotionally, though, it was not all plain sailing. Deidre experienced difficulties with some of their mutual friends: "Some friends were .... were awkward. They didn't quite know what to do with it .... And I accepted, sometimes with a lot of heartache, that you can't be friends with both". When Deidre started working at the hotel, Richard's "colleagues all came in and out of the hotel. Some of them greeted me, some of them walked right past me. People who knew me, had been to my mother's funeral, suddenly couldn't see me. They knew me, they knew the children, they had phoned me for my birthday. But suddenly they couldn't see me". This was hard for Deidre: "I shed a lot of tears about that. I often had to move away, to pull myself towards myself again. That was very difficult". One of the aspects of this was Deidre's new status as an 'ex-wife': "I found it very hard and very painful to be Richard's ex-wife. And there are so many people who ignore me, who know exactly who I am, but they ignore me. They're embarrassed that I'm an ex-wife. And that was very hurtful for me indeed".

These incidents with friends added to Deidre's sense of rejection, which she describes by listing numerous friends and relatives who had either died or moved away from her. "I can remember saying to Richard many years ago, 'Why is it that people that get close to me always leave?' It's .... it's the rejection, it's the leaving. I can't bear the leaving .... I don't want to be abandoned." However, Deidre had to suffer yet another 'leaving' when William decided to go and live with his father. "It was the last of my people leaving me".

William's leaving, though, was well-timed, because at that time Deidre had secured her new job. "I was grateful for the diversion. And going off to work just refocused me. It was something I had never done before. So I had huge learning to do. I didn't know *anything*. But it was such a mind focuser for me that I had no time to do anything else except work. I can only say it was my saving grace.

Otherwise I might have languished on in this terrible slow swim that I was in, and just travelled with the tide. I had a new current come at me and had to cope with it".

Deidre experienced "a degree of jealousy for a long time. I was jealous of what Richard was doing. He was travelling overseas and holidaying and buying a new home and spending money. So was I, but that was alright, but it wasn't alright for him. He was spending it on Joan. I was jealous of that". At times Deidre's feelings about Richard were extremely strong: "I wished him dead .... I wished Richard dead many times". The first year was full of despair and exhausting for Deidre: "There were lots of tears, there was lots of anger; there was lots of 'Will I ever be alright again? I'm worthless' ... . I got quite fraught in that year, in that I couldn't get off the topic. It's what I spoke about with everybody all the time, and I got tired of it. I got tired of Deidre's marriage break-up. I almost felt like a rose-beetle on its back, you know, bzzzzz, and it just went round and round and round. I was so sick of it".

7.2.2 Support

"I'm very blessed by a divine sister who loves me to death. She was really wonderful to me. She phoned every day, twice a day, three times a day". From her, Deidre received what she called "emotional support. She would just listen". But it was hard for her sister to understand certain aspects of Deidre's situation "because she's not married to that type of man, she doesn't know what men like that are like". In addition, Deidre's sister "was terrified of the money. She thought I was so wealthy, she was embarrassed by it" and couldn't understand Deidre's anxiety about her financial responsibilities.

At this time, Deidre belonged to a woman's group associated with a business organisation, her "forum". All eight members of this group were married to high-powered businessmen: "all those forum girls were married to men like Richard - hard-driven, executive, successful men. My forum friends could understand the

bigger picture". Several other members of the forum also went through divorces at the same time as Deidre. In comparing experiences, Deidre was able to obtain practical advice, such as financial planning, as well as being able to talk: "The first six months I always felt that I held the floor and did all the talking, the whining, the complaining". But the forum was a space where she was able to do this. Deidre "wasn't allowed to be helpless with my forum. There are no helpless women in *that* circle. They're all copers". This further strengthened Deidre's image of herself as someone who could competently contend with her circumstances.

With her friends, however, "I was allowed to be a little girl. I was allowed to be helpless with them". These were long-term friends, many of whom Deidre had known for twenty or thirty years. "They were very unsympathetic to Richard. They agreed with all my anger, and that was quite good for me, to be indulged and washed with pity, and overly loved". Deidre describes this as "a sisterhood that is really wonderful. I'm really comfortable with women".

In addition to the informal support of friends and family, and the semi-formal support of the forum, Deidre also sought professional counselling. She said "I was very sure about the kind of counsellor I wanted. I wanted somebody that didn't know Richard, that didn't know anything about us, who wasn't within my immediate circle. I wanted to be anonymous, and I wanted a man". The counsellor that Deidre found was a man, of about the same age as she. "So what I got as a counsellor suited me". She would often question why she was going to counselling before a session but found that there was always an issue to discuss: "He'd bring up something from last time, or a different issue and it would spark me off. Sometimes I had an issue that I needed to deal with, and sometimes the issue just arose. But I *always* left there feeling 'well done'". Deidre described the counselling as "very steadying for me".

A further interesting source of support for Deidre was from reading. "I read quite a lot .... I could have read a whole lot more on the issue ... . I wasn't interested in the periphery, I was only interested in the emotion of it". Although Deidre said that

she never encountered a book which accurately described her emotional experience, some of the techniques she employed to deal with Richard were obtained from self-help books.

"I will tell you what I did develop. I developed almost a renewed religious tolerance. I've never been religiously fanatical. I'd never been hugely religious. We were not regular churchgoers. I went back to church. I have to say it was a good place for me to be for the time being .... I went back to where my boys were both christened, where I knew people who knew me .... I felt enveloped. I felt I was back within the fold. I was cared for. I think it was the spiritual experience; I chose not to do the fete, not to do the prayer meetings. That was good for me then. It's still good for me". This was an aspect of life that Richard never wanted, and that Deidre had consequently denied herself during her marriage. The severed marriage relationship freed Deidre to rediscover her spirituality.

7.2.3 Recovery

"A girlfriend of mine said. 'You'll develop no perspective on it for two years. You need two years before you can look over your shoulder and see that there is a road behind you, not just dust and cloud and debris'". Deidre had certainly gained perspective on her experience: "It's taken me a long time - three and half years - and I'm only just starting to say, 'Well, I'm Deidre' .... Deidre has become quite precious to me". Her sense of identity and self-respect have developed considerably through the process of separation and divorce.

But there were still issues with which Deidre was struggling. "I hope, ultimately, that Richard and I will be friends. I can't possibly have loved somebody for thirty years and call him bad names. But while Richard is with Joan, I won't be his friend. He chose Joan over me. If he moved away from Joan, and had another woman in his life, I would negotiate a friendship with him. I like Richard. I could never have done thirty years and had two divine children from him and say anything else. But I won't negotiate Joan. My favourite words for her are, 'I don't wish her

oxygen'".

Deidre herself had not engaged in a new relationship. "I'm *almost* not surprised that I'm not in a new relationship, because I won't let anyone in, because if I don't let anyone in, no-one can leave me". Her fear of rejection and abandonment was still very intense. She also attributed her lack of a relationship to her increased 'selfishness'. "Living alone and having to manage alone, I'm surprised at how selfish I've become ... . But I think it's a necessary part of life and perhaps it should have come to me a long time ago". This seemed to be strongly associated with a clearer sense of herself as a person in her own right.

There was definite pride in Deidre's voice when she described an incident where a colleague had congratulated on the way in which she had conducted herself at work during the separation. "I was quite pleased to hear that that's what *I* had done. The one thing I knew I never, ever wanted to do, was to lose my dignity. I never wanted to give anybody the opportunity to say, 'Look at Deidre's behaviour, she's out of control'. *Never!* Deidre must always be in control, she must always be in charge of what she's doing". Her natural need to control was put to good use in handling this life crisis.

Another thing that Deidre is proud of is that "I never got to a point of depression - I think I'm too emotionally strong to go there. I was very broken when Richard left. I didn't think that I was heading into a dark depression. I was strong enough to know that I could survive it". Deidre had had previous experience of loss: at thirteen she lost her father; at fifteen a sister; and at seventeen and eighteen she lost maternal grandparents who lived with her family. She drew on these experiences, and the knowledge that she had come through all that, to develop an image of herself as an 'emotional coper': "I was grown-up years ahead of my time. So emotionally, I wasn't frightened at all .... And when I look back, for a long time I said that Richard leaving was the *worst* thing that ever happened to me. But that's going into a slot with other emotional issues for me. It becomes one of the list".

In summing up her experience, Deidre said, "The heartache was incredible. The separation was unbelievably painful ... . It was *painful*. Survival? ... . You can survive unhappily as well. But I think I've come through survival and I would almost be bold enough to say to you I'm just about living. I'm .... I'm not divorce dependent any more, I'm beginning to leave it behind".

7.3 ANALYSIS

Deidre's initial reaction to separation was shock and numbness (Gullo, 1992): "Those two weeks were black .... I operated on battery with no emotion at all." Following this, Deidre mourned for the loss of her marriage; in particular, the loss of social identity and status that comes with being a 'wife': "I found it very hard and very painful to be Richard's ex-wife" (Kitson, 1992). Feelings of rejection and abandonment were enduring themes throughout Deidre's story (Haber, 1992), and it appeared that her divorce may have opened old wounds in this area.

Gullo (1992) describes the magnification stage of the divorce process as one in which the woman magnifies the partner's post-separation positive situation and her own negative situation. Deidre reflected this in her words: "I was jealous of what Richard was doing. He was travelling overseas and holidaying and buying a new home and spending money". Deidre also stated that, "I wished him dead", supporting the concept that death of a spouse may be easier to deal with than divorce because the divorced person's partner is physically still within reach, although metaphysically removed. Deidre confirmed that she would have found it easier to deal with the situation if Richard were physically gone.

The most important coping mechanism Deidre employed was that of taking control of the situation, and thereby maintaining her dignity. In terms of her behaviour, she did this by distancing herself from Richard and by not revealing her emotions: "I was uncompromising"; "I was absolutely stony to his pain". Deidre had a strong image of herself as a coper: "I know that I'm an emotional coper ... . I can cope with *anything*". She was able to demonstrate a balanced coping self-presentation,

however; neither too self-sufficient nor too helpless, thus allowing potential support providers to offer support where necessary (Silver, Wortman & Crofton, 1990).

Deidre's social network changed considerably, and painfully, following her separation (Nelson, 1995): "People who knew me, had been to my mother's funeral, suddenly couldn't see me". She did receive support from her sister; Deidre described this as "emotional support", but pointed out that in some areas her sister did not understand Deidre's situation (Lin & Dean, 1984). The forum group provided support based on shared values and understandings: "All those forum girls were married to men like Richard .... [they] could understand the bigger picture". The forum provided information support, such as advice on financial planning; emotional support, providing a place to talk (Cutrona, Suhr & MacFarlane, 1990); and it provided identity support by encouraging and confirming Deidre's perception of herself as a "coper" (Swann & Brown, 1990).

Like Estelle, Deidre found herself adapting her coping self-presentation to her different support providers: "I was allowed to be helpless" with friends, but not at forum, "I wasn't allowed to be helpless with my forum". Friends, in particular, supported Deidre by confirming her righteous role in the divorce: "they agreed with all my anger" (Kunz & Kunz, 1995).

Deidre's job was a source of positive support for her. It was a distraction from her emotional situation, as well as a challenge to learn new things: "I was grateful for the diversion". It also provided an opportunity to establish new routines (Kitson with Holmes, 1992).

Deidre believed that she was adjusting to her life as a divorced woman: "I've come through survival and .... I'm just about living .... I'm beginning to leave it behind". Clearly, Deidre perceived adjustment as a 'work in progress'. In terms of Mazor, Batiste-Harel and Gampel's (1998) description, Deidre was coping with her ex-spouse in a semi-integrative manner. Deidre had not forgiven Richard nor had she forgiven Joan: "If he moved away from Joan, and had another woman in his

life, I would negotiate a friendship with him .... But I won't negotiate Joan". The sense of rejection caused by Richard leaving Deidre for another woman was still very painful and Deirdre was struggling to integrate this experience.

An indication of Deidre's ability to cope is that she used many *different* sources and types of support. The forum, although not specifically designed to deal with divorce, provided information and emotional support, as well as a temporary community in which others were going through the same process as Deidre (Oygard, Thuen & Solvang, 2000). Her friends and family supported Deidre emotionally, they allowed her to express her feelings of helplessness, anger and sadness. Deidre's counsellor provided a "steadying" environment, where she obtained directive guidance (Stokes & Wilson, 1984). Her return to religion and the church supported her spiritually, and made her feel "cared for". Due to the depth and breadth of support that Deidre was able to access, it is unlikely that she would have benefited significantly from a formalised divorce support group.

CHAPTER 8

ELIZABETH

8.1 BACKGROUND

Elizabeth and I met in her duplex flat in a suburb of Johannesburg. It was Elizabeth's 59th birthday that day. She lives alone with her Maltese poodle, Becky. Elizabeth was very proud of her home, showing me around proprietarily; I admired the spacious rooms and the family pictures. Elizabeth is a willowy, attractive woman who clearly pays attention to her appearance and dress. She was very expressive, and appeared to enjoy the opportunity to relate her experience. Elizabeth was the only one of the women I interviewed who had attended a support group specifically aimed at dealing with and healing the wounds of divorce.

At the time of the interview, Elizabeth had been divorced for two years, after a second marriage of seven and a half years. Elizabeth's first marriage had lasted twenty-eight years and she had three adult sons from this marriage. Her first husband, George, had been an alcoholic. One year after she divorced him, she fell in love with and married Michael, a man eight years her junior.

8.2 THE JOURNEY

Although she had already experienced one divorce, Elizabeth's second divorce was no easier. The first marriage "broke down years before the divorce, so the divorce itself was not emotional. There was nothing to miss. He wasn't a friend, a husband or a lover. I came to terms with so many things .... I found me, Elizabeth, in the year after I divorced George. I could be so open, so frank, for the first time in my life, and I wasn't just 'George's wife' anymore".

Then Elizabeth fell in love with Michael, a man she had known for eight years through his marriage to one of her friends. Michael had been married three times

before his marriage to Elizabeth. They went to a function together and suddenly there was "chemistry" between them. This was very flattering for Elizabeth, who was then fifty years old: "I never thought he'd be interested in me because of the age difference. It was enormously flattering that this younger man found me attractive". "I absolutely adored him. I didn't know such a love existed. He was the complete opposite to George – laid back, kind, compassionate. I fell deeply in love and married him".

Elizabeth's family "disapproved of Michael. My family saw through him right from the beginning". But she was in love and eventually went to Malawi, where Michael was working, and they were married; "I believed he would be the person I wanted him to be". "A week after I'd married him, I knew I'd made a terrible mistake". After leaving Malawi, Elizabeth and Michael moved to Johannesburg and then to Cape Town. "He was a diesel mechanic. I washed his filthy, oily overalls, I cleaned the car, cooked, did the dishes, made him twelve sandwiches for lunch every day. I just felt I was a slave. Michael hated what he did. Every job he had, he hated. We had no money. We couldn't come out on what we were earning". Seven years later, Elizabeth was despairing of their situation: "I couldn't cope any longer with the financial situation, it was too depressing ... . He just left me to do everything financially ... . I worked mornings in Hout Bay. Michael wouldn't help at all at home, because he felt I had a half-day job, so I must have plenty of time to do everything else". Clearly, Elizabeth's expectations of a 'partner' in the responsibilities of marriage were not being met. This was a source of great disappointment and frustration for her.

It wasn't just Michael's laziness that created problems in their marriage: "My husband hated work; he also suffered with dreadful depression". The age difference was also an issue for Elizabeth. "The fact that he was eight years younger than me put a huge strain on me. I thought he was ashamed to be seen with me. He never wanted to go out together; and when we did go out, he was always anxious to get home". Michael assured Elizabeth that the age gap did not matter, but to Elizabeth, it did. She felt insecure and unworthy; this added to her perception of herself as

nothing but a household 'slave'.

While they were married, they attended a marriage revival course, offered by their church. Elizabeth was inspired by this: "I said to him, 'I've got to the point where I want to grow, I want to read, to mature, to learn things'. And he just looked at me blankly .... I really hoped he would change". After completing the course, Elizabeth asked Michael what he'd found to be the most profound revelation, to which he replied, "I am not the man of the home". But the course didn't change anything. Michael was not prepared to change: "He really believed he was okay".

They tried marriage counselling, also through the church. "When we went to our pastor in Hout Bay for counselling, he told me, 'I feel totally helpless'". This was of no assistance to Elizabeth, who was feeling very powerless about the situation herself. The breaking point came when Elizabeth went on holiday without Michael, but with her sons and their families. "Then I realised what an unhappy person I was. I aged twenty years in the time I was with him .... The children intimated that it would be better if I came back to Johannesburg". Elizabeth had started to get perspective on her situation. "When I went back to Cape Town and to Michael, I started to see him as he really was".

8.2.1 Separation

"When I told him I was leaving, Michael cried for three days. He said, 'I don't drink, I don't gamble, I don't womanise; what more could you want? I'm such a good husband'. What I wanted was a man of the house and for him to be responsible". Elizabeth had exhausted herself in her efforts to change Michael into the kind of husband she envisaged. I had a sense of Elizabeth's strong image of what marriage should be developing more and more cracks, until the entire image shattered into tiny pieces.

Michael never tried to persuade Elizabeth to come back. "He never pursued me. Once, when I spoke to him on the phone, he said, 'I want my wife back'. Not 'I

love you and really miss you, and please can we work through our problems'. I felt he wanted his 'slave' back". This hurt Elizabeth deeply, as it indicated very obviously how Michael perceived her. It was a further blow to her sense of self-worth.

Elizabeth had felt that it was not necessary to get a legal divorce once they were separated. One of the underlying reasons for this was her yearning for reconciliation. She had really hoped that they could work at it and "right the wrongs". However, when Michael "refused to co-sign for a loan on a new car, that was a cut-off point. I was *so* angry!" It then became practical for Elizabeth to obtain a divorce. Her brother paid for this "so that it would be a clean cut". However, this did not provide the closure that Elizabeth so desperately needed at that time.

She returned to Johannesburg. "I had no car, no home ... . I lived with my eldest son for three months. It was an *absolute* disaster". There were difficulties with the son's marriage, and Elizabeth felt isolated: "I was downstairs in the guest suite, and they were on *thaaaat* side. I often didn't even see them in the morning". Elizabeth house-sat for a while, lived with her second son "in fear and trepidation", and eventually found her own duplex after selling her Cape Town home.

Elizabeth also worked for her eldest son. "I was an emotional wreck – skin and bone – not computer-literate, not an office lady at all .... I didn't know a *thing*. I was so green ... . I drove his one-ton truck all over, picking up goods and delivering, doing the banking". Elizabeth's job added to the stress she was experiencing due to her divorce: "Emotionally I was crippled. If he (her son) just raised his voice, the tears would run under my glasses and down my cheeks and onto my lap ... . The tears just streamed because I just couldn't cope with the job, or anything else for that matter at *that* time". Elizabeth was out of control in many areas of her life.

"I was depressed for about eighteen months ... . *Another* failed marriage ... . I knew

I should never have married him. I was so angry with *myself*. I believed in him; I believed he would support me". One of the losses Elizabeth experienced during this period was "loss of face". Her family had clearly expressed their disapproval of Michael before they had even married; but "I wanted to prove that he was good". Elizabeth felt guilty both about marrying Michael and about leaving him. "I felt so guilty leaving him because he was a good man. He was very loving and affectionate. But that's not enough to hold a marriage together". Increasingly, I recognised Elizabeth's feeling of disappointment with herself and with Michael.

But Elizabeth still loved Michael, despite the fact that she could no longer tolerate living with him. "I loved him when I left, and for months and months after I left". Her sadness was overwhelming: "I walked around my home sobbing because I missed him so much .... I so wished it could have worked .... I was so sad that we couldn't come right". "Deep down, I longed for it to work, for two years". This 'hopeful' period was very stressful, waiting for Michael to contact her, to offer to change, to make it 'right'. It was only when Michael remarried that Elizabeth lost all hope of reconciliation.

8.2.2 Support

When Elizabeth came back to Johannesburg after the break-up of her marriage, her sons and their wives were sympathetic. "But I felt that I had to prove to them that Mom was this 'iron maiden'!" Although she was living with her children, she didn't want to burden them with her problems. "My second son was studying part-time to be a pastor. He knew I was devastated, and he was very compassionate. If I said to him 'I'm struggling', he'd offer bits of advice. I didn't think I should talk to my sons about it". The sons offered material support, such as providing appliances when Elizabeth was setting up her new home. They also provided places to live, and employment. Other family members, such as Elizabeth's brother, assisted financially. Her sister was supportive when she left Michael, saying to Elizabeth, 'You've tried so long and so hard, I'm really proud of you'.

Elizabeth did have friends who had also experienced divorce, but they were not a major source of support; for example, "I found with my son's mother-in-law, she didn't really want to hear about it, although she was also divorced. Others I could share with, but not easily or happily". "I did have a good friend, Janine, she would take me out for meals frequently. She was also divorced, and had also been married to an alcoholic". It appeared that Elizabeth's network of supportive friends was somewhat limited, adding to her sense of isolation.

Elizabeth's main source of support was her strong commitment to God. "The Lord has been so good to me. I prayed and got answers .... I got concrete and practical assistance from the Lord". Elizabeth also got guidance from her faith: "My desire was to every day be more and more like the Lord. I would think, how would the Lord react to this or to that?"

It was Elizabeth's son who suggested she attend a course run through a church. Elizabeth had had previous experience of support groups as she had joined Al-Anon during her first marriage in an effort to cope with George's alcoholism. The church course was called *Divorce Care*, and originated in the United States. It ran for thirteen weeks; each week the group would view a videotaped counselling session with a divorced person, and then discuss the video as well as "any problems you are facing, any happy things, any growth". Elizabeth described the support she experienced through the group: "On the course I could dump the guilt ... . The most wonderful thing is that everyone else in the room knows what you're feeling". In the stressful period following separation, "At times you think you're going a bit mad .... T he course helped me realise it was *normal* not to want to pick up a phone, or to socialise". There was no pressure to share emotions or experiences: "On the course, nobody *made* you talk". The group consisted of seven people, with only one male, and all "much younger" than Elizabeth. The facilitator was a member of the church, herself a divorced woman. Summing up the support offered by the course, Elizabeth said, "I was set free to grieve".

It appeared that the combination of a supportive group and an emphasis on

spirituality was a source of great comfort to Elizabeth. The group provided an opportunity to socialise and to form new relationships: "We used to have social evenings during the course .... You grow very close to the people in the group. It was quite sad at the end of the course to know we weren't going to see each other as a group again". They had made plans to get together afterwards, but had not done so. The spiritual aspect was strongly emphasised: "We would open in prayer. We would pray during the session for those with specific problems. The younger people on the course were often amazed at how powerful prayers are, as most of the women there did not know the Lord personally". Biblical interpretations of the divorce crisis were also valuable to Elizabeth's understanding: "A most amazing eye-opener was .... you know, marriage means you become 'one flesh'. Divorce tears apart the flesh, and that's why it's *so painful*. Once I understood that, it really helped me".

Group members were also given homework: "We were given scriptures to look up and questions to answer; a reading for each day of the week. This was very helpful. For example, anger. You really needed to make an effort to rid yourself of that anger". Not only did Elizabeth receive direct support from the course, but "I also felt I was helping the others by sharing my experience, my problems, and where I was, and how I was able to work through situations".

8.2.3 Recovery

"I'm only now, two years after the divorce, beginning to think 'You're okay, girl'". Elizabeth's second marriage and divorce was a major setback in her personal journey; she had begun to find a sense of identity and self-worth after her first divorce, but "that seemed to disappear when Michael came along. It was almost like I needed him so much to love me .... It's so sad that a man can make you feel like a nothing. Because that's what Michael made me feel". Elizabeth felt that "the hardest thing is to forgive ourselves when we've made a huge mistake".

Elizabeth had worked hard through the process of separation and divorce, and

believed that she was recovering. "I feel very separate from Michael now. There's nothing to tie me to him ... . I used to write to his parents in the UK. But I've got a letter sitting there from his mother, and I haven't replied. I feel that because I'm not married to him any more, there's no point".

Elizabeth had recently changed jobs: "Now I'm feeling wonderful. I'm so excited about my new job – I can't wait to wake up and go to work tomorrow!" When she compared her feelings about work now and how stressed she had been in her job directly after her separation, she said, "I know I am able to do anything now".

Her social relationships were a source of joy and comfort: "Now I've also got wonderful friends, two divorcees that live in the same block of flats. It's really wonderful having them in the building. We socialise in each other's flats, have dinners and coffee and so on. We've got so much in common, it's amazing. Sometimes we talk about our ex's. I don't want to harp on it, though. I don't want to talk about it any more ... I don't need to. It's history now".

Elizabeth had 'found' herself again: "The most important, the most vital thing is that I love 'me' now. I've realised how valuable I am, and that's why I'm so at peace ... . I feel so precious in God's eyes". There was a great feeling of confidence, strength and serenity in her words. "Every need of mine is met. I earn very little, but I have everything I need .... I'm never lonely since I committed myself to the Lord. I love being on my own".

Looking back on her journey, Elizabeth said, "I've grown so much. You don't think you have. But as I'm talking to you now, I realise how much I've changed, how far I've come, and I give all the glory to the Lord, who is my best friend!"

8.3 ANALYSIS

Elizabeth was the only woman among the participants who had left her husband as opposed to being left by her husband. This did not appear to make the process any

easier for Elizabeth, though. The primary stress of Elizabeth's divorce (Pearlin, 1989) was severely compounded by the secondary stressors of relocating, financial difficulties, having to live with her children, her sense of isolation and lack of social support.

In terms of Gullo's (1992) description of the emotional course of divorce, Elizabeth emphasised 'grief' in her story. Her feelings of sadness and despair were often overwhelming: "I walked around my home sobbing because I missed him so much .... I was so sad that we couldn't come right". This was exacerbated by the desire to reconcile, which continued until Michael remarried.

Elizabeth felt strongly that her divorce was a failure on her part (Albrecht, 1980), particularly as this was the second time: "*Another* failed marriage". In addition, it was as if Elizabeth had experienced a double loss of self; she had lost her sense of self-worth during her first marriage, regained it after the divorce from George, and then lost it again during her marriage to Michael (Haber, 1992): "It's so sad that a man can make you feel like nothing. Because that's what Michael made me feel".

It is possible that her loss of self-esteem also disrupted Elizabeth's positive expectations of support (Sarason, Pierce & Sarason, 1990) and may be associated with a poor coping self-presentation. This could have led to avoidance and rejection of Elizabeth by potential support providers (Silver, Wortman & Crofton, 1990). For example, Elizabeth said that one of her friends "didn't really want to hear about it". Another explanation for Elizabeth's lack of perceived social support may be that her deep involvement in her spiritual relationship with God precluded her from revealing her problems to others (Pearlin & McCall, 1990).

Guilt played a large part in Elizabeth's experience; guilt that she had married Michael in the face of great disapprobation from her family, and guilt when she left him. As Kitson (1992) points out, this is a fairly common experience. Elizabeth was simultaneously relieved to be out of a very uncomfortable situation, but also guilty because Michael was "a good man", and she still loved him deeply.

It was difficult for Elizabeth to seek support from her family, who had disapproved of Michael from the start of their relationship. To risk disclosing her marital problems to the family might have exposed Elizabeth to their criticism of her decision to marry Michael: 'We told you so' (Goldsmith & Parks, 1990). It is also possible that Elizabeth, out of a sense of loyalty, felt the need to protect Michael from the family's criticism of his behaviour.

The support that Elizabeth received from her divorced friend confirms Lin and Dean's (1984) findings that support is more readily accepted from someone who has shared values and understanding of the experience. However, due to Elizabeth's relocation to Johannesburg, it would not have been easy for her to seek out such individuals. Elizabeth's sons provided tangible, material support (Cutrona, Suhr & MacFarlane, 1990), specifically in providing her with a place to live and employment. They also supported her in establishing a new home. Some of this support may have had a negative impact on Elizabeth, resulting in her perceiving herself as dependent on and indebted to her children (Kessler, House, Anspach & Williams, 1995). She became reluctant to share her difficulties with them: "I didn't think I should talk to my sons about it".

As Elizabeth experienced little emotional support from friends and family, the church-based support group was a great source of social and spiritual support for her. The course offered emotional support (through the group members); cognitive information (through the homework exercises); and directive guidance (via the Biblical interpretations of the divorce experience) (Stokes & Wilson, 1984). It would appear that the group provided an integrative pattern of coping (Mazor, et al, 1998) in that it helped Elizabeth confront difficulties, such as anger, and to move on.

The group was semi-structured (e.g. Vera, 1993) with structured homework exercises and a video presentation at each session, but issues were raised in the group in an unstructured manner: "any problems you are facing, any happy things, any growth ... . Nobody *made* you talk". Elizabeth valued meeting people who had

experienced the same things as she and who could relate to her experience, particularly the facilitator, who was also a divorcee. Elizabeth expressed her relief at finding her behaviour was "normal", that she was not "going a bit mad" (Oygard, Thuen & Solvang, 2000). In support of Norberry's (1986) findings, Elizabeth found it helpful to share her problems and solutions with other group members. She was very excited about being asked to facilitate a future support group and saw this as a further step in her journey to recovery.

Elizabeth's social network had changed during the process of divorce (Nelson, 1995) and she had developed friendships with other divorced women. The support group offered the potential of friendships after the course, although Elizabeth had not pursued this. However, the group provided Elizabeth with a temporary community whilst she was involved in the course: "You grow very close to the people in the group".

A positive indication of Elizabeth's adjustment to divorce was that at the time of the interview, she was looking forward to the future; her life was "characterised by anticipation rather than memory" (Spanier & Thompson, 1984, p. 103).

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

9.1   CONCLUSIONS

The five women who participated in this study all had their own unique experience of separation and divorce. Gail, Mary and Elizabeth, in particular, described enormous personal growth as one of the outcomes of their experiences. All of them felt relief and a sense of self-determination following the pain and grief of separation. This appeared to be facilitated largely by the social support they experienced. The esteem support (reassurance and validation) and emotional support (willingness, sympathy and listening) that they received strengthened them and made them aware of their own identity (Cutrona, Suhr & MacFarlane, 1990).

For some of them, the 'work' of adjustment' was almost over; for others, the process of integrating their experience was still in progress. For example, Elizabeth and Estelle had reached closure in terms of their ex-husbands. Mary, Deidre and Gail, however, had not completely forgiven either their spouses or the 'other women'. It is possible that divorce support groups, such as the one attended by Elizabeth, may accelerate this process of integration by working through issues of anger and forgiveness. Structured exercises may be of assistance in this area (Vera, 1993).

Support groups may also provide practical and informational support, such as financial management and planning, or dealing with the legal aspects of divorce. (Norberry, 1986). Mary and Deidre would both have benefited from such support. Although Deidre said that she derived a degree of practical help from books, none of the other women mentioned this as a source of support. The changed circumstances of divorced women often illuminate areas in which skills are lacking, and these may be competently addressed by a support group. It would seem that informational support was not provided in any large measure by the women's

support network of friends and family.

An enduring theme in the stories was that of 'being strong'. For example, several of the women had self-conceptions involving self-sufficiency: Deidre perceived herself as an "emotional coper"; Gail and Estelle both saw themselves as strong, coping individuals; Elizabeth wanted to show her sons that she was an "iron maiden"; and Mary described herself as "not someone who *needs* lots of people". A key aspect of social support appears to be the communication of the need for support (Silver, Wortman & Crofton, 1990). This study illuminated the issue of coping self-presentations; in particular, the balance between expressing one's need for support, and demonstrating a self-conception of coping well. Those women who displayed balanced coping self-presentations (Mary and Deirdre) appeared to receive more perceived social support than the women who maintained a strong coping façade (Gail and Elizabeth). An important function of a support group could be to encourage the exploration of self-conceptions such as self-sufficiency. This would free the individuals to grieve (as Elizabeth summarised her support group experience), and to enable them to ask for support when necessary. Being in a group with other divorced people who were experiencing the same thing would possibly allow the women to relinquish their need to be seen as 'strong'.

Some of the women used their workplace as an environment in which they could demonstrate their competency; where they could be seen to be 'normal'. This was in contrast to their home lives, which were often emotionally chaotic. Estelle, for example, would not cry at work, but saved that for weekends. Deidre and Mary both saw their involvement in their careers as a distraction from the emotionality of separation. The importance of work or career is underemphasised in the literature surrounding social support and divorce. It would seem that formal employment provides divorced women with an extended network of supportive people, as well as a sense of purpose. Having to go to work each day and to focus on things other than the divorce situation may assist individuals in re-establishing "their equilibrium and routines more rapidly" (Kitson, with Holmes, 1992, p. 223).

In the process of exploring self-conceptions, divorce support groups could also clarify the woman's own role in her marriage break-up. Several of the participants attempted to explain their role: Gail thought she may have been too tied up in her children's lives; Deidre suggested that she hadn't needed her husband enough; and Mary believed that her increasing involvement in her career upset the balance of power in her marriage relationship. It is possible that, by determining their own role in the divorce, they would be able to let go of their guilt or self-blame. Such was Elizabeth's experience in her support group. Friends and family did not seem to provide support in this area. Most of the women felt affirmed and validated in their 'blameless' role by the people who supported them. While this was important for their sense of self-worth, it did not encourage exploration of their married roles. In terms of entering into new relationships after divorce, it would be preferable that women understood what had gone wrong, and their contribution to the marriage relationship.

A further theme in the stories was that of the image of marriage and family held by the women. They had certain expectations that were often not met, and their definitions of 'marriage' and 'family' often compounded the loss of identity and status they experienced. For example, Estelle and Elizabeth were both disappointed in their expectations of their husbands as 'the man of the house'. Deidre struggled with the concept of being an "ex-wife"; while Mary mourned the loss of companionship that she felt she could only obtain in the marriage relationship. Deidre and Gail both emphasised the fact that a family is 'forever'. Most of the women's friends, and certainly their families, had similar views of marriage and family to those of the women. The support they offered, therefore, perpetuated the women's views, allowing no space for other definitions. One of the ways in which a support group may be of value is in helping divorced women to redefine 'family'. Other people in the group may well have different definitions, such as a more extended view of what comprises a family. Exposure to other perspectives could assist the women in internalising a new definition of what family means.

All of the women acknowledged support from various different sources: friends,

family, groups, religion, and formal support such as counsellors. Deidre and Gail, in particular, made use of many varied sources of support. However, their experiences of perceived social support were quite different. One explanation for this could be that the contexts in which they sought support were dissimilar: Gail perceived herself to be powerless and out of control, while Deidre had consciously taken control of her situation. In addition to context, expectations of support are important. Gail expected to receive concrete advice, but was unable to formulate and express her needs in the midst of a chaotic situation. Thus, it appears that perceived social support is influenced by the recipient's expectations (Sarason, Pierce & Sarason, 1990). In Gail's case, a support group may have provided the necessary structured support to alleviate her sense of chaos. However, Deidre, who had imposed her own structure, would have been less likely to benefit from such a group.

It would appear then, that a support group may be a useful mechanism for providing support to divorced women during the post-separation period, particularly for women who do not have a high level of perceived social support, or who lack skills or knowledge in certain practical areas.

In the case of women who do have high levels of social support, it is doubtful whether a support group could ever provide what Estelle and Deidre, in particular, experienced. They had long-established friendships with other women, with whom they had shared a life history. This is, perhaps, irreplaceable by any formal mechanism.

9.2   RECOMMENDATIONS

The most difficult aspect of providing support through a formal group is that of the uniqueness of each individual's needs. However, it is recommended that a group designed to assist women, in particular, in dealing with divorce should take into account the following aspects.

The post-separation period is often a very chaotic time emotionally. Thus, structured exercises to deal with emotions such as anger, sadness and guilt are helpful in reducing the chaos.

The changed life-styles of divorced women necessitate information and skills-training in certain areas. Lectures and workshops addressing issues such as finance, employment and single-parenting are of great value.

Cognitive issues such as redefining concepts such as family could be addressed in either a structured or unstructured manner, using the composition of the group to broaden perspectives.

The group should be able to provide a temporary community, particularly for women whose social network is limited. Thus, the group should allow for the building of relationships within the group, through discussion and social activities. It would appear, however, that as the need for support lessens in the process of divorce, there is no necessity to structure ongoing socialisation beyond the duration of the course.

In order for divorce to be a positive, liberating experience, women need to embark on a journey of self-discovery. In many cases, their self-esteem and identity have been damaged in the process of divorce. Structured exercises to develop insight, self-esteem and a sense of identity should be an integral part of a divorce support group.

Considering that most divorced women report other women as their major source of support, it might well be useful to provide groups specifically for divorced women; such groups would not include men. In addition, as the majority of women in this study reported an important spiritual factor in their journey to recovery, it could be valuable to combine spiritual and secular aspects of support in certain groups.

9.3   LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The case study method allows for in-depth exploration of unique individual experiences. One of the limitations of this method, though, is the lack of generalisability of the data. Further limitations of this study include a cultural bias: all of the participants were white, English-speaking South African women. It is also limited in the socio-economic status, in that the participants were all in the upper income group. Various factors contribute to an individual's experience of divorce, such as the reason for the divorce, who initiated the divorce, age and number of children, economic factors, and relationship with the former partner. This study focused primarily on women who had been left by their husbands for another woman. In addition, none of the women who participated had young children still living at home.

9.4   SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As this study focuses entirely on the female perspective of social support in coping with divorce, it is suggested that the male perspective be investigated. It is possible that men experience different degrees and types of support to women, and that the interaction of factors comprising perceived social support would vary.

A further area of exploration would be the differences in social support required by women with young children compared to women with adult children, as parenting issues would be of major concern to the former. Custodial issues and the relationship with the former partner, as well as practical issues would influence the amount and type of social support required by mothers of young children.

Cross-cultural studies of the role of social support in coping with divorce would shed further light on this field of study. Religious factors, societal influences, family structures, and gender roles are among many factors which determine the role of social support during a life crisis such as divorce.

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APPENDIX

PERSONAL DETAILS QUESTIONNAIRE

Age:

Residential area:

Number of children living with you:

Number of children living with your ex-partner:

Number of children living away from both parents:

Approximate monthly income:

Does your ex-partner provide a) alimony?
                               b) child-support?

Do you own your own home?

Are you currently employed a) full-time?
                            b) part-time?
                            c) not at all?

How long were you married?

How long have you been separated from your husband?

Are you currently   a) dating?
                          b) living with a partner?
                          c) re-married?