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Divorce in Mormon Women: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Divorced women who reentered as undergraduates at BYU were interviewed using the naturalistic inquiry model for qualitative research. All respondents reported some negative reaction related to their divorced status from fellow Church members. Women who divorced non-member men received more support from ward members than those who divorced active members. Identification of the religion with ward relationships meant that insensitive treatment by leaders during divorce could precipitate a spiritual crisis and potential departure from the Church. However, renewed spiritual strength was reported after some resolution of issues.

An argument may be made that membership in the Mormon Church involves socialization into a specific, encompassing socio-religious culture (Bloom, 1992). However, Mormons, like their fellow citizens, do not appear to be immune to the problems presented by ever-changing and sometimes conflicting views of marriage, divorce, and the proper roles of women represented by the larger culture. Indeed, contrary to previous studies, recent demographic data “indicate a relatively high level of marital instability among Mormons” (Heaton, 1992, p. 26), which is also in contrast to the preferred role of the LDS woman in which “marriage and motherhood receive the major emphasis” (Gunnell & Hoffman, 1985, p. 35). This article will focus on the experience

of some LDS women who have confronted the issues of divorce as it occurs in the context of their membership in the Mormon Church.

Women and Divorce

Divorce means the loss of a meaningful life role as wife and a consequent narrowing of the woman's previous community of friends (Wietzman, 1985; Riessman, 1990; Bogolub, 1991). Yet this is just one aspect of the complex stresses which may be experienced by the divorced woman. Clarke-Stewart and Bailey (1989) report that while a small number of men do experience severe problems from divorce, women are likely to experience a less severe but more frequent and long-lasting myriad of physical and mental health problems due probably to uncertain finances, poor employment prospects, custody and child care stresses, and social isolation. "On global indices of psychological adjustment [divorced] women are likely to do more poorly than [divorced] men" (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1989, p. 75). Lund (1990) comments on this disruption:

Women generally report little social support from their married counterparts as they attempt to negotiate the transitions inherent in the divorce process. A divorce is often viewed as the woman's failure to do her job, as she is generally assumed to be the emotional caretaker of the family relationships. Society often treats divorced women as "failures who cannot (or will not) take and maintain a 'respectable' or 'responsible' family role" (Herman, 1981, p. 111, cited in Lund, 1990). If a woman succeeds in her attempts to become autonomous, she can be viewed as a threat to the stability of others' marriages and will receive less than (adequate) support (p. 61).

Divorce and The LDS Church

While the leadership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints emphasizes the permanence of the marriage bond and officially disapproves of divorce (Ludlow, 1992), there are no ecclesiastical sanctions for divorce itself. Yet divorced LDS women still feel the effects of being formerly married "within a marriage-oriented church" (Shaw, 1985, p. 22). In such a family-oriented church, many divorced Mormons feel "a strong sense of personal failure, and [do] not fit into the

couple-and-family format of church activities” (Scharman, 1992, p. 135). Indeed, much guilt and grief can result in being separated not only from the financial, social, and companionate aspects of marriage, but faithful LDS persons may also feel keenly at odds with the requirement inherent in LDS doctrine that “the gospel of Jesus Christ affirms as its very crown and capstone the eternal perpetuation of marriage” (Covey & Madsen, 1983, p. 17).

This theological focus on marriage results in cultural and social mores which tend to devalue divorced persons (Norton, 1967; Shaw, 1991). Shaw (1985) describes “being divorced in the LDS Church [as] particularly painful” (p. 23) and continues:

The divorced are not offered the status of the widowed nor do they have the feeling of “pureness” associated with the never-married. When an active member divorces, many changes take place in his/her relationship with the [LDS] Church which reinforce unworthy feelings and a sense of being a “second-class” citizen. (p. 23)

Divorce may also complicate ordinary activities such as “family nights, Scout programs, father-son [and] daughter-daddy activities, and family togetherness as the [LDS] Church teaches they should function” (Norton, 1967, p. 87).

Thus, the most acceptable role for the Mormon woman remains that of a married, stay-at-home mother. However, the leaders of the LDS Church have communicated some tolerance of working mothers, while expressing compassion for, but not approval of, the divorced person’s status. In spite of these recent statements of support, the LDS woman who values her religion, yet who is divorced, employed, and perhaps a parent, may be vulnerable to the stress of not meeting the ideal role expectation which is a prominent part of her religion.

Method

The research study presented here explored the experience of divorced women who reenter Brigham Young University (BYU) as undergraduates. Eleven divorced reentry women [students older than 25] were interviewed in open-ended conversations resulting in 263 pages of transcripts which were examined according to the

procedure developed by Edward S. Halpern (1983, cited in Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which specifies the collection of raw data, data reduction and analysis, and data reconstruction and synthesis.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) are seminal qualitative theorists (Scott, 1991) whose model, naturalistic inquiry, was used in this study. The reader is referred to their book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, for a discussion of some basic differences in assumption between the positivist tradition and the qualitative model in terms of realities, knowing, generalization, cause and effect, and the place of values in research.

Certain procedures such as planning for trustworthiness and credibility follow from these assumptions. These differ from conventional research in two readily apparent ways. First, trustworthiness is the naturalistic version of reliability and validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Reliability, in the conventional formulation, is not possible in naturalistic studies, as the studies are not replicable since they are time- and context-bound. So while statistical researchers seek validity, naturalistic researchers plan for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This study employed several strategies to achieve trustworthiness and credibility. First, the study was organized to provide for a trail of research records, including field notes and transcripts of the initial interviews with the participants. Follow-up interviews were conducted in which the perceptions of the researcher were checked with each participant. In addition, the researcher consulted with colleagues (termed peer debriefing) during the data analysis and the synthesis of thematic categories and used personal journaling to examine her own perceptions during the study. Triangulation with existing scholarly research reinforced the credibility of this study.

The first step in data analysis was the data reduction and analysis and an examination of transcripts for meaningful units: that is, for sentences and paragraphs which held a specific point of view or a piece of information discerned intuitively by the researcher in a process of thoughtful examination and reexamination of the data. To process the transcript data, an extra copy of the 263 pages of transcripts was employed in the division of data into categories.

This annotated and highlighted copy was cut with scissors into pieces containing the units of meaning with the line-numbering preserved to facilitate the tracking of the quotes. The pieces were placed into their respective categories and secured with large clips. An intact copy of the transcripts was maintained for reference.

In the process of comparing the units of meaning to one another, categories became apparent. Gradually, as information from succeeding interviews was considered, some categories were seen to collapse into each other, while others became better delineated and more distinctive until all the data was accounted for.

Thus, interviewing and analysis took place simultaneously until the interviews ceased to generate new categories. The details were different from respondent to respondent; however, a similarity of reported experience became apparent. Ten women had been interviewed when redundancy became clear. An eleventh interview further confirmed that redundancy had occurred, and no further interviews were held.

Because a qualitative study begins with no *a priori* hypothesis, there is no specific research question to be answered. Instead, there is a reconstruction of the data categories into themes which are synthesized into greater understandings and presented as descriptions and explanations about divorced LDS women, as well as the development of hypotheses stemming from data gathered at the source of the experience, the women of the study.

Contexts of the Study

A qualitative study is by its nature context-bound. So knowledge of the contexts is necessary for readers to make an appropriate decision as to the applicability of the findings to their own settings. An assumption is made for this article that the readers have a sufficient familiarity with the Mormon Church, BYU, and Provo, Utah, and so the contexts are not described.

The eleven women interviewed in this study were divorced reentry women at BYU. All were moderately active to very active Caucasian members of the Mormon Church, and each of them, without prompting, spoke of their belief in the divinity of Jesus

Christ and in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Five were born into the Church and six were converted. Five were in their early 30's; three were in their early to mid 40's; and three were in their early 50's. Seven had been married in temple ceremonies. They had married at an average age of 21 and their marriages had lasted from two-and-a-half years to 21 years. Although one marriage ended abruptly following the husband's arrest for molestation, the other women had made efforts to maintain their distressed marriages. Eight of the marriages included incidents of emotional, physical, spiritual, and/or sexual abuse. All of the women had children. Nine had children living with them, ranging in ages from 5 to 17.

All of the women interviewed lived in modest circumstances. Some of the homes observed contained furniture brought from the more affluent homes of their marriages, such as large china cabinets with fine china and crystal. All looked clean and neatly organized.

The women themselves presented great variation in their demeanor and apparent emotional states. Some wept as they recounted difficult episodes in their lives. Some showed on-going anger or depression. Others displayed a resolution of past issues and a forward-looking point of view. Many were accepting and humorous about problematic past events. The children observed appeared to be thriving; those not observed were described to the researcher with apparent concern and affection.

Results

Relationships in the Religious Culture

As the transcripts of the interviews were analyzed, common themes or categories began to emerge which clearly show that Mormon women have some experiences which are specifically related to their membership in the LDS Church. These categories, from supportive experiences to problematic ones, will be presented in the following order: (1) the support experienced by these women during and after divorce by their ward (congregation); (2) fitting into the religious culture as a divorced person; (3) a differentiation between widows and divorced women; (4) problems related to church functions and activities. This last area will be considered in

terms of ward dinners, callings, home teachers, Sunday School and Relief Society meetings, and family and singles wards.

Degrees of Ward Support During Divorce

Although part of an international church with a highly centralized administration, the member's most relevant contact with the LDS Church is at the local congregational (or ward/branch) level. The most important local ecclesiastical leaders are the ward bishop and his direct superior, the stake president. Thus, an active member will usually look to fellow ward members and local leaders for friendship, support, and guidance, especially in times of distress.

The women in this study, as active family-oriented Mormons, looked to their ward and branch members and leaders for support as they went through the process of divorce. Some of them reported receiving strong and helpful support and others reported receiving little support.

An older respondent reported: "[My divorce from a non-member] was horrible, and the people in my ward were real supportive, understanding, caring, and really helped me, took good care of my kids." A second woman, whose husband was arrested, recalled: "I thought everybody at church was going to shun me [for bringing him into their midst], but they didn't. Members [in my home ward] were just great."

Two respondents, an older woman from the west coast and a younger woman from the midwest, gave accounts of their divorces as complicated by problematic relations with others in their wards. The older woman, who divorced a prominent member of the stake hierarchy, described a response different from the previous supportive accounts:

At first, my divorce was really painful because I was rejected and shunned and chastened by various people in the ward. I [was told] that they didn't want me teaching seminary because I was a bad influence all of a sudden. [My bishop] told me he had several parents come and complain because I was divorced. I had a stake president tell me that I would never hold a responsible position in the Church again [and] that my former husband would go on and marry a lovely new woman and have a wonderful little family, and I would grow old and lonely all by myself. It was a nightmare.

A much younger respondent reported an experience in another LDS couples' home. The husband in that marriage held a prominent branch leadership position. The respondent was with her abusive [member] husband in one room and the second woman had gone into another room:

I don't even know what the conversation was about, but I asked him something, and he lost it. He threw me down into the piano. [The second woman] walked over to him and put her arms around him and said, "Are you OK?" And I was just sitting there on the floor and . . . she looked at me and . . . said, "What did you say to him?" It was awful. And then it spread [to other members of our branch].

The older woman described her experience of shunning:

Oh, walking down the hall [in the church building], being the only one in the hall besides the person who's coming towards me and saying "Hi" to them, and having them just walk by without a word. And some of the men in the ward were very cool; where they would speak to me before, they wouldn't speak to me voluntarily. They would say hello if I said hello to them, but they wouldn't initiate anything beyond that. They would even move away from me.

The younger respondent recalled being shunned because she had divorced:

I shouldn't say they treated me badly; [they] shunned me, which to me at that time was very painful. They wouldn't even talk to me, [and these] were the people . . . I'd known for many years in that branch. . . . I don't fault the people now, ... (but) I was pretty bitter for a long time.

The younger woman described her difficulty in making others understand her situation. She described her former husband as "fun-loving, funny, and [able to] always put people at ease." She recalled that while she made attempts to tell others of her abusive marriage, she did not perceive that she was believed. She stated, "One time when I tried to tell [my bishop] that I was afraid to drive home with [my husband] one day after church, he told me that was silly."

Fitting in as a Divorced Person

As divorced women, all respondents reported they have received negative responses in varying degrees from some other members of the Church. Some felt these as pervasive phenomena,

with great impact in their lives. Others perceived negative responses as acceptable minor features of their lives. For example, one woman stated: “There’s just no way to totally fit in unless you’re married. The Church [revolves] around the family experience kind of thing. You just have to make up your mind . . . that it’s not going to bother you.”

Another respondent described the way in which activities revolve around the family experience in her ward: “The elder’s quorum had an activity at the park on Saturday [for the quorum and families]. Nobody invited the single women.” She continued: “Those kinds of things signal [that] a woman and her family ought to be included, but they [aren’t]. I’m sure that no one intends to exclude [us], but they just don’t think.”

Other subtle occurrences were noticed by these women. Several women told of mentioning their divorce experience and of having the subject changed immediately. The effect of this behavior is reflected in this woman’s comment: “I don’t feel rejected, but I don’t feel full acceptance, either. Somewhere between the two is what I feel . . . nobody has been hateful or rude, and the bishop is very nice, very understanding.” Another woman described her experience:

There is this constant little thing to remind you that you’re not what everybody else is, just that you don’t have a priesthood holder, that your children don’t have a dad, and you don’t have somebody to sit with you in church. It’s not even [the thought] that you ought to [have a spouse]. There’s just an assumption that you do [have a spouse], and so you just feel left out.

Another respondent watched as couples were asked to speak in church soon after their arrival in her ward, but she had not been asked after being in the ward for a year and a half.

I was sitting in [the Sunday church meeting] . . . and a family had just barely moved into the ward. They had only been there a week or two and they were there speaking, and it was kind of like the straw that broke the camel’s back. I started crying and I bawled the whole way through [the meeting]. I was so embarrassed and . . . trying to hide in the corner of the pew. At the end, one of the [bishop’s] counselors came

down and wanted to know what was wrong, so I just told him. I said, "Don't I have any value as a person because I'm divorced?"

In the next few months this woman was asked to speak twice in church. An older respondent in another ward concurred:

Only young married's get to speak in church. That's just the pat thing in our ward. It's really weird. None of the older people get to speak. You'd think they'd tap in on some of the maturity, but they don't.

Some bishops are reported to be especially understanding and supportive of divorced mothers and their children. One respondent reported that her bishop set up baby-sitting one night a week for several single mothers in his ward. Following an incident in which a married mother forbade her children to play with the neighborhood's single mother's children, a bishop took the unusual step of giving a child a calling to make her feel a part of the ward.

A Differentiation Between Widows and Divorced Women

Two aspects of being widowed as opposed to being divorced were voiced. First, the widow is seen as having the prestige of having had a successful marriage, regardless of its quality, whereas the divorced woman has failed in hers. Thus, the widow appears to have the natural compassion of the ward.

One woman commented that while both widows and divorcees suffered great emotional loss, divorce had an additional element of pain because, as she commented: "The guy is walking around on two legs, seeing your kids, being a jerk about child support, marrying again, having children, and coming around with his little wife blowing in his ear in front of you at church."

The second attitude, which a divorced woman is not subject to, is the view that a widow's life is finished. A respondent commented: "He's gone; they're done." The divorcee's life, while unfortunate, at least is not finished.

Problems with Church Functions and Activities

A good portion of an active Mormon's time may be spent in callings and at ward activities (Lee, 1992). The women in this study also discussed this aspect of their lives. Several areas were mentioned which will be reported in this section: ward dinners,

callings, home teachers, and Sunday School and Relief Society meetings.

Ward dinners. A ward dinner is a social gathering to which an open invitation is issued to all members of the ward. It is commonly held in the social hall of the church building, which may be equipped with a kitchen. These gatherings are held at various times during the year at the discretion of the local leaders. Some wards may have them more often than others.

The comments from the women in this study regarding ward dinners reflect a problematic view. One woman stated: "I hate ward dinners. It is such a family-oriented affair. It's awkward." Another stated, "When they have a ward dinner, you come by yourself. You'd better find some other single people to settle with because even if [you] bring [your] 8 kids with you, you're an outcast; you don't fit in." A third respondent did find other single people. She described her approach to ward dinners:

At ward activities I felt kind of funny going by myself. A lot of times I would call someone ahead of time and ask if I could sit with them at a dinner or something like that, and kind of arrange it ahead of time. That helped, instead of just going in and thinking, "Who am I going to sit with? I feel out of place."

Callings. Lee (1992) refers to the participatory nature of the LDS Church, in which "the responsibility for the success of the ward rests with every member, not just with the bishop and other key ward leaders" (p. 80). There are dozens of "callings" (unpaid positions) available in any ward, having to do with teaching, music, service, and other activities for both men and women.

Having a calling in one's ward is not only a service to fellow ward members, it is also an important way of being included in the life of the ward. Although two of the older respondents have callings in family wards (as opposed to singles wards), one as ward music chair and the other as Relief Society luncheon committee chair, other respondents noted a striking discrepancy between their experience in previous wards and their present predominately married BYU student wards. One woman said of her ward:

They're very nice people; [but] it's been odd. I have not had a calling since I moved to Utah. I have a current temple recommend; I have never had any problems getting a temple recommend. But, in [my home state] I was in the Primary presidency, then I was the homemaking counselor in the Relief Society presidency, and then I came to Utah, and nothing for almost 4 years. It's just been difficult. It hurts to be living a good life and wanting to give service and see married couples come into the ward and be given callings immediately, even before their records arrive, and it just, I don't know, it's just been hard.

An older respondent stated:

They tend to ask married women only to be in positions. It's when they start getting strapped [that] they start looking at the single women. I think they need to look at women at large, not whether they're married or not, because they need to represent all women.

Another woman, who attends a BYU single student ward, presently holds a calling in the Relief Society presidency. She commented on her calling: "I don't think I would have had it in [her former, predominately married student ward]." An older, more assertive respondent told of obtaining her calling:

I'm in the Relief Society because I requested it. I said to the bishop, "I'm a woman who is alone without adult company most of the time. I will not be in the Primary for another 7 years. I want to be with adult women. This is something I would not have done 15 or 20 years ago. I'm older now; I can request where I want to be and not want to be and I wouldn't have thought of that before. I would have thought, "Oh, wherever I'm called."

Home teachers. "A central feature of Mormon practice is that members of each ward . . . are assigned to teach each other every month in the homes" (Lee, 1992, p. 60). Relief Society visiting teachers are pairs of women who visit the women of the ward; home teachers are pairs of priesthood holders (age 14 and up) who visit members' homes. The respondents in this study did not mention Relief Society visiting teachers. They did discuss problems with an absence of home teaching. Some of them attribute this absence to their status as divorced women who might be considered threats to others' marital stability. One woman recalled:

I had to go in and say, “Look, I don’t have any home teachers. I need some home teachers.” I said, “What’s the matter? [Are] you having trouble finding a man whose wife won’t be scared to death to let him come over and visit me?” I brought it right up. [And the leader said], “No, no, it will be OK.”

A second respondent described her experience:

It wasn’t as bad out of Utah. But . . . in Utah people are very protective of their husbands. [The women’s separating themselves from me] used to hurt me a lot. [I decided] the best defense against this happening is not to speak to their husbands. I’ve had [my home teacher] want to stop and say something, then [he’ll] change [his] mind. When I’d call for assistance, [his wife] would say, “What do you want. I don’t think you ought to bother him about that.” I said [to my bishop], “Don’t send . . . any more home teachers to my house, because I don’t want to be accused of something I’m not.” So, he just kind of laughed, and they sent an older couple to my home, at my request.

Having an older couple function as home teachers was problematic for another respondent, who pointed out that the married couple would be unable to give her a priesthood blessing should she desire it. Thus, she felt the opportunity for her to have those priesthood activities in her home was thwarted.

Sunday School and Relief Society Meetings. Sunday School and Relief Society meetings are held on Sundays as part of the three-hour period of worship. These meetings are conducted by and for the adult men and women, and usually consist of prayers, hymns, and lessons. Participation in the lessons provide an opportunity for members to contribute their wisdom, experience, and opinions to the meetings.

Two respondents described the same general experience of being silenced in Sunday School and Relief Society meetings. They had stated their opinions (derived from their experience as divorced women), had been met with silence, and had said nothing further. After the meetings, they were then approached by women who supported their view, yet who had declined to speak out in the meetings. One respondent illustrated this:

There’ve been a few times . . . I’ve said a few things, but I can always tell who the divorced ones are, because after, they say, “I know

just exactly what you mean.” They come right afterward . . . but not in the meetings. They’ll give support after. It’s like we don’t belong and yet we do.

Family Wards and Singles Wards. Wards, the local congregational units of the LDS Church, are organized by geographical boundaries. Thus, if a person lives in a certain area of a city, he or she is a member of that area’s ward, known informally as a family or home ward. Some wards are organized across geographical lines to accommodate special populations, such as a Spanish-speaking ward organized in a predominately English-speaking area.

Some singles wards have been organized in response to the Church’s perception of the special needs of single members. The experience of the women in this study has been mainly in family wards; however, some have attended singles wards organized in the Provo-Orem area and at BYU. Their experience of both family and singles wards is reported here.

This respondent typifies the experience of the women in this study. She commented on her *de facto* restriction to female friends:

Our family ward, the one I was in [when I got divorced], was quite friendly, but there’s just a barrier. I think just the fact that you can’t have men drop by in a family ward; it just doesn’t happen. You can’t be friends with males, because they’re married, and most of the time their wives are uncomfortable, or people think you want them. I think a lot of us get [a] lost feeling. It kind of depends a lot on the ward, but I’m afraid that a lot of people feel pretty ostracized, especially if you’re not really outgoing. I think a lot of women feel that way.

Another commented on her BYU married student ward, which she attends because her home is located within its geographical boundaries:

Sometimes I get real tired of it. Sometime I feel like, “Let me out of here!” They tune into [me as], “I’m a single mother.” They probably don’t ever think about the fact that I was a young married mother at one time with a little child.

A respondent who attends a BYU singles ward stated: “[It] has alleviated a lot of problems for me.” She reported an active social life and having both male and female friendships stemming from her membership in a singles ward.

Because only a few singles wards provide children's religious programs, single parents tend to remain in family wards for the instruction of their children. However, one divorced mother attends a singles ward that has children's programs. She described her experience:

If you go to a family ward, they have their own kids to worry about. . . . In the singles ward it's nice because most of the people don't have kids, so they are always playing with my kids. The kids have a ball; they get lots of attention. They feel like it's their ward and they like going to church.

Another respondent, without young children, described her large singles ward: "Every month we have some kind of ward activity, like a dinner, a talent show. Our latest project was to furnish an apartment for homeless people. Here I'm . . . just one of the gang. I'm just like everyone else—I'm single."

Outside the tradition

The LDS Church places great emphasis on the traditional family, which is defined as husband, wife, and children. This concept extends to grandparents and other relatives as well as the ward family or church family. However, the conceptualization of family in the LDS Church is essentially patriarchal. Therefore, the question is, what is the experience of LDS women who divorce and who then are not connected to the patriarchal family through the central principle of marriage?

The women in this study, by their act of divorcing, deviated from the traditional ideal role of the Mormon woman, a conceptualization which tends to equate a woman with her roles as wife and mother. The fact of her return to school primarily for economic reasons and her probable future as her family's breadwinner further removes her from that traditional concept.

Different divorce experiences

As shown in this study, some LDS women who divorce receive much support from members of their ward family. As a result, they perceive support from the LDS Church in general, as their connection with the larger Church is through the personal

attachments of the local area ward. In these cases, the women's testimonies of the Gospel were strengthened. The women who reported this supportive experience were women who had divorced either non-member men or, as in one case, a man who was eminently rejectable on the basis of his revealed pedophilia.

Other women had vastly different experiences. Their's were scenarios of shunning, chastisement, and rejection by the other members of their wards. These women seriously questioned their commitment to their membership in the Church.

The reported instances of substantial withdrawal of ward support and difficult relations with ward and stake leaders occurred in divorces from men who were active members themselves. Apparently, divorce in these cases is viewed very differently from divorce from non-members or discredited members of the Church. The husbands in these situations reportedly maintained the support of the ward members. From these women's perspective, the major part of the blame was placed on the woman seeking the divorce, even though abuse and neglect from the husband was present, although not readily apparent to outsiders.

It appears that for this group of women, some divorces are more acceptable than others, depending on the religious status of the husband. This may be a function of the network of friendships among the men of the Church, which is promoted by the holding of the priesthood and the camaraderie resulting from priesthood meetings, projects, etc. For example, one respondent reported:

The . . . bishop told me I was a raging feminist and that I did not want to obey the priesthood, and so did the stake president. [So] I got the two of them together, which was a very gutsy thing for me to do because I was a mess emotionally and I'm not confrontive. I got the two of them together in my stake president's office and I said, "OK, I want to know who you get the idea [from] that I'm this male-bashing, raging feminist?" Anyway, they wouldn't answer and I asked them again. Finally, the third time I said, "If you don't come up with what exactly I have done and you've observed me doing, being this priesthood hating, male bashing, raging feminist, then I repudiate these accusations . . . and I never want to hear them again." Finally, my bishop had the guts to say, "[Henry] told us." And they bought it because he told them. I said, "Well, I rest my case. What do you expect?"

Spiritual crisis

These women did not question the existence of God or the divinity of Jesus Christ. Rather, what was so problematic for them was the insensitivity of some individual members who unfeelingly reinforced the Church's emphasis on the nuclear family without regard to the women's current family status. These difficult experiences appeared to contaminate their religious connection. For example, one respondent describes her last meeting with her bishop during her divorce: "My scriptures were sitting in my lap and I shook my fist like this, and I said, 'If you people don't leave me alone, I'm leaving the Church.' He felt really bad at that point."

That these women remain in the Church and describe themselves as active members is a reflection of their deeply held beliefs in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It also suggests the depth of the emotional pain engendered by their perceived rejection by formerly friendly members and leaders.

Spiritual Strength

All of the women in this study demonstrated sustained and/or renewed spiritual strength. Their experiences are varied and reflect lessons learned in the process of divorcing and establishing different lives, as well as the development of non-traditional views. Several perspectives were apparent.

First, an older respondent commented on the effect of her religious affiliation: "Oh, I couldn't have made it without the Gospel in my life. I just would have fallen apart and just laid down and died." Another stated:

Bishops don't intimidate me [anymore] and when I go to my darling Relief Society with the older women who say, "The bishop is coming; the bishop is coming to our dinner!" I'm going, "That's really nice, but he's just a guy." It's not like deity.

A younger respondent said: "I know when I finally came back around and started feeling it more spiritually, my life sure went a lot easier." An older woman commented:

I was walking through this quiet new house, and then the thought struck me, this is the spirit of Christ. This is a Christ-like home. What

a tragedy I had to take the priesthood holder out to have a Christ-like environment.

Another older woman commented:

Part of [what] I had to get through was . . . David O. McKay's statement, no success in life can compensate for failure in the home, and I [had] failed . . . It took a long time for me to realize we were becoming successful because of the divorce. I started thinking, what would have been the results if we'd stayed married with all these problems staying hidden, and I decided divorce is not a dirty word any more.

Still another woman found the spiritual sustenance missing in her ward experience in her university classes:

[BYU] is my Church family, too. I love the Book of Mormon class, [because the teacher] always encourages me to [talk] . . . School that way has become a spiritual guidance, too. [In my ward] it's like I just go to the meeting, I learn something, and I go home."

A young respondent stated: "After the divorce happened, I came to the realization that Heavenly Father helps you a lot more than what I ever realized before, and so I gained a stronger testimony of . . . what Christ must have gone through." An older respondent echoed her, with a variation:

It takes a great deal of humility . . . and some tough knocks [for a woman] to find out . . . that she can find her place and be in harmony with Christ and Heavenly Father, and Heavenly Mother, and contrary to what some people are saying, I do talk about her, because I love her.

One respondent had this advice: "We cannot rely any more on the testimonies of our fathers, or our brothers, or our bishops. We need to know for ourselves, because there's going to come a time when we're not going to have anybody to rely on."

Conclusion

As divorced women, these respondents reported experiences similar to those reported in the literature generally regarding divorced women in America. They experienced the same abrupt and substantial decrease in income, disagreements with former husbands over child support, and moves to more modest houses and apartments. Entry into the university was motivated primarily

by the intent to increase their earning ability. Their divorced status felt problematic in a church so oriented to the family, defined as father, mother, and children.

Being divorced, the LDS woman is outside of the tradition and culture of her religious faith and does not meet the heavily emphasized ideal model. In the LDS Church, having access to a [male] priesthood holder is important. The divorced LDS woman is somewhat removed from that. The women in this study who divorced non-member or discredited men apparently received strong ward support during their divorce process, which strengthened these women's faith in the Gospel and increased their degree of satisfaction generally with the Church. However, the women who had divorced active members of the ward reported being shunned and chastised by ward members and leaders.

Spiritual crises occurred in which these women seriously questioned their commitment to their religion. Positive feelings eventually returned, and the women remained members of their church. However, due to the identification of the religion with ward relationships, it appears that insensitive treatment by leaders during the divorce process could precipitate a spiritual crisis and potential departure from the Church.

Implications for LDS Therapists

1. When dealing with any specialized population, the therapist is well-advised to have a good understanding of that group's unique issues and concerns. The treatment of a divorced LDS woman would begin with the therapist's understanding of the dynamics of divorce generally and the attendant feelings of loss and disorientation that most people go through as a marriage relationship breaks up. Major changes in lifestyle are common, particularly for a woman, who may go from being a full-time homemaker to shouldering the primary responsibility for supporting her family.

An LDS divorced woman faces these and additional issues. She may feel estranged from a good part of her identity as she perceives herself removed from the "respectable position" she enjoyed in a church that esteems marriage and family. This woman may report

feeling ignored, awkward, negatively judged, or unworthy to serve in her previously comfortable religious setting.

2. Sometimes a divorcing LDS woman makes judgments about the Church generally when her issues are more directly related to particular personalities within her ward family. Assisting her in exploring and understanding the differences between the Gospel and the specific culture of her ward or branch may be helpful. In this way she can be assisted toward a more beneficial stance which may include increased assertiveness, a more inner locus of control, and a more realistic (and less all or nothing) approach to these problems without the distress of discarding the Gospel as her source of a mature spirituality.

3. The therapist can teach the client to recognize if her ecclesiastical leadership or fellow ward members are behaving inappropriately and to develop ways to address and correct the situation. This intervention would also include teaching the client to recognize instances in which she may be projecting her expectations that negative reactions will automatically accrue to her because she is divorcing. Even if some ward members react negatively, not all will. Support and continuing friendship among Church members are to be found and will help in developing a realistic perspective on the naysayers.

4. While LDS women who have divorced share some commonalities, as much variance exists among single as there is among married individuals. A woman early in the divorce process may have very different feelings about remarriage, earning a living, acceptance by ward members, or a desire to be involved in church activities than a woman who has been divorced for several years.

Thus, while divorce and single parenting are challenging experiences for women, an LDS divorced woman can feel encouraged to move ahead and take charge of her life. Her life may be very different from what she had earlier expected or wanted, yet these new circumstances, for all their difficulty, still hold the promise of new growth and happiness.

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