SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN THE DIVORCE TRANSITION

ORNA COHEN, PH.D.
The Bob Shapell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, Israel
AND
M. LOWENBERG
School of Social Work, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel

This article analyzes the support systems of a single-parent father-headed (paternal) family and those of a single-parent mother-headed (maternal) family during the divorce transition. Support expected and received from the family is the highest, followed by support from friends. The desire for support from friends is higher than the support actually given, whereas more support is given than is desired by the ex-spouse's family. In relation to all sources of support, mothers express more desire to receive help than do fathers, and in fact do receive more support.

The research literature and professional practice indicate that divorce is a process of crises with extensive psycho-sociological implications. It is a process accompanied by feelings of helplessness, anger, rage, depression, guilt, suspicion, and ignorance. These elements are likely to erode the individual's ability to cope, and for this reason it is socially acceptable to ask for support and to receive help (Caplan, 1974).

Mutual supports operate in a certain order, from the closest and most intimate relationship to more distant ones. Usually, persons in distress first try to resolve their difficulties by themselves. Only then will they turn to the informal support systems that are closest to them for help, and only after then to other more distant informal support systems (Golan, 1980).

The purpose of this article is to examine the nature of support systems available to divorced persons, as well as the gap between the optimal social support and that actually given. These elements are investigated by comparing father-headed (paternal) single-parent families with mother-headed (maternal) single-parent families.

This article is based on a doctoral dissertation submitted at Bar-Ilan University, Israel.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERISTICS OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN THE DIVORCE PROCESS

Lack of Cultural Codes

In their list of life stresses, Holmes and Rahe (1967) ranked the divorce crisis as the second-most intense crisis that a person undergoes during his or her lifetime, second only to a death in the family.

When a spouse dies, there are clear behavioral norms that are dictated by society and embodied in cultural behavioral codes, such as the mourning rituals in the Jewish religion. In divorce, the *lack* of a clear behavioral code is striking. Therefore, persons who have undergone a divorce crisis have no idea what kind of support to expect from their personal social network, nor do they know what the sources of support will be and what to expect from such support.

Change in the Structure of Informal Support System and Ensuing Difficulties

The place of a support system can be examined according to the traditional model of requesting help, which indicates that a person first tries to cope with his or her distress alone and only afterward turns to an informal support system — a spouse, family, or friends. However, in a divorce crisis, where

there is a serious rift between the spouses, one cannot turn to one's spouse for help. For other members of the informal support systems, especially members of the family of origin, the very notion of divorce may run counter to their family values.

When a structural-system change occurs, the structure of the family of origin also changes. First, the divorce reduces its size. Divorce can also serve as an additional source of pressure (Wilcox, 1981), especially when the family of origin was unhappy with the marriage or with the decision to divorce or in instances where the family feels that the divorce agreement was economically unfair (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987).

In Israel there is an additional consideration. The family in Israel is a relatively stable institution compared with families in other Western cultures. In Israel, there is a tight network of social supervision and religious and cultural values that make a familial lifestyle mandatory. Sometimes, parents are concerned not about the well-being of the divorcing son or daughter but rather about "what society will think about a divorce in our family" (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987).

Sometimes the divorce of a son or daughter occurs at the very time that those in the older generation are passing through a stage when it is natural to express increased dependency on their child who is in the midst of a divorce. In these situations, the head of the new single-parent household is subject to many situational pressures that arise out of the reactions of the family of origin.

Other difficulties in the system include relations with mutual friends that the couple had before the divorce. Divorced persons often break off social ties with the group of friends to which they belonged when married. This severance of relations may stem from the divorced person's feeling that being alone is perceived as strange and different in a "couple" society, much like a fifth wheel. At the same time, divorced persons seek new roles compatible with their existential need to reorganize their lives; they strive to become part of social groups whose social characteristics are similar to their own (Luxemburg, 1987).

The children of the divorced couple are affected by divorce as well. Wallerstein (1986) notes that the lack of definite social norms and the difficulties of the separation lead many parents to turn in their hour of need to their children, as a source of love and support, as though they were adults. Young and teenaged children are forced to become sources of support, warding off their parents' loneliness and desperation and participating in making economic decisions that are inappropriate for children of their age. Minuhin (1984) defines these children as "child-parents" and points out that these relationships are problematic in themselves.

Support of Informal Systems

Most of the people who experience the divorce transition do not find in their personal past suitable models for the new situation, from which they might be able to learn how to cope. To facilitate their adjustment to the new situation, they must turn to social support that will supplement their personal coping.

Despite the above-mentioned difficulties related to support systems, most researchers report that divorced persons receive a great deal of assistance from their family of origin, both material and emotional support, which fosters their adjustment and well-being (Gerstel, 1988; Johnson, 1986).

Whereas the family provides practical help, the support of friends is mostly emotional (Gerstel, 1988). According to Bell (1981), the women's friends support the new relationships that the divorced woman is forming, without making any attempt to understand their nature. The family is different in this respect, as the tendency is to express reservations about certain social patterns that the divorced woman is creating and to speak their opinions about the

character of various social ties (Luxemburg, 1987). A small number of studies do not support these findings (Spanier & Hansen, 1981).

The Support of the Ex-Spouse's Family

Little attention has been paid in the professional literature to the help and support relationships with the ex-spouse's family, even when there are blood ties and a third generation—grandchildren. Ambert (1988) found that even families that did stay in touch after the divorce gradually lost contact as time went by. Instances in which the family of the ex-spouse provided assistance were rare and occurred mainly when the head of the single-parent family was a woman. Ambert (1988) explains this by noting that it is the woman who throughout married life was responsible for the "public relations" of the family; sometimes she continues in this role even after the system structure has changed.

DIFFERENCES IN THE SUPPORT SYSTEMS OF MATERNAL AND PATERNAL FAMILY HEADS

Usually the mother who has custody of her children is the focus of research studies. These women ask and receive help from their families more than do men (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1989; Rice & Rice, 1986; Weitzman, 1985). There is a difference in the kind of support obtained: women receive financial assistance, whereas men receive emotional assistance. The proportion of women who turn to a formal professional help system is higher than that of men. These findings are consistent with studies dealing with variables predicting help, which claim that women apply for help more than do men (Ames & Lau, 1982).

Only a few studies deal with fathers who have custody of their children. Even fewer studies deal with the fathers' appeals for help, but those that do exist report that fathers raising their children apparently were ashamed to admit that they needed help, probably because this behavior is incompatible with the masculine ideal (Mendes, 1976) or perhaps out of a desire to prove that they are capable of coping with the new situation without external help (Berman & Turk, 1986; Greif, 1981). In a study conducted in a special milieu of mutual friendship among men—single-parent divorced fathers in a U.S. Air Force base—Bowen (1987) found that the help of friends was the most significant. A different finding was reported by Coney and Mackey (1989) who concluded that fathers were more willing to accept help than mothers. However, this study suffers from a shortcoming; it was conducted within a limited population group.

In the transition to a single-parent family, the father is required to exchange a familiar set of roles for a new set of roles, requiring a redistribution of resources. Both men and women need to adjust to the undefined parts of their new roles, which were generally not acquired during the socialization process. Both sexes encounter difficulties, each crossing the boundaries into the other's traditional gender roles. The uniqueness of the single-parent father group lies mostly in their filling a role that almost completely contradicts the social stereotype of the classic role of a mother or father. The question that now needs to be answered is, In a situation where the roles of a paternal or maternal family head are being redefined, will the "classic" differences between men and women in asking for help be preserved as they are in other situations?

RESEARCH STUDY

This study measures qualitatively the social network of paternal family heads as compared to maternal family heads. Is there a gap between the desired support and that actually given by the relevant sources of support: partners (if available), family of origin, family of ex-spouse, and friends?

Method

This study was based on 180 participants, 103 of whom were divorced persons head-

ing single-parent families — 62 males and 41 females. This article reports only the findings about the heads of single-parent families. There was a striking demographic similarity within the single-parent group between the paternal and the maternal families in terms of the number of children (an average of two), parent's level of education (partial academic), and the age of the youngest child (11).

To be included in the research population, a single-parent family head had to meet all of the following criteria: (1) live in Israel; (2) be divorced according to the Jewish religion and currently still be divorced; (3) have at least one child aged 4 to 18 living with the family head; and (4) have custody of the children as a result of a custody agreement (as part of the divorce settlement) that was legally endorsed by a judge or rabbinate judge. The study included divorced parents across the country who were raising their children by themselves. The actual selection of the participants was undertaken by social workers in local social services departments, by professionals in agencies that assist divorced women and men, and by self-help support groups. Due to the limited number of fathers raising their own children, the intent was to study all the fathers located by the various welfare agencies who consented to participate in the research.

Most of the participants belonged to a middle or higher socioeconomic group. Most were born in Israel and defined themselves as being secular (nonreligious). Approximately one-third were "newly" divorced; that is, within the last 2½ years.

A questionnaire, which was designed for this study, examined to what degree the participant was interested in support and was satisfied with the level of support currently received. It examined four sources of support—family of origin, family of ex-spouse, friends, and a new partner for those family heads who established a new couple relationship within the past year. Five types of support were possible within each of the sources of support: help with household chores, child rearing, economic, emotional, and counseling. In all, 20 items dealt with the "desired" degree of support, and an additional 20 items dealt with the "actual" degree of support.

The respondents were asked to rate their answers on a scale of 1-4: 1 — completely uninterested/dissatisfied; 4 — satisfied/greatly interested. Eight statistical measures were derived from this questionnaire—one for each of the four "desired" support sources and one for each of the four "actual" support sources—by calculating the mean assessment of five sources of support: help in household tasks, raising children, financial help, emotional help, and advice. The questionnaires were mailed to the subjects between February to July 1990. They were answered anonymously; the subjects did not write their names, identity numbers, or any other personal information on the questionnaires. The comparison between the groups was made by means of variance analysis (ANOVA).

Study Findings

Significant differences were found between desired and actual support received from the family of origin, family of the ex-spouse, and friends. The support demanded and received from the family of origin was the highest, followed by the support demanded of friends, and lastly, that demanded of the ex-spouse's family. The largest gaps between the desired and the actual were with friends as a source of support, where the desired support was significantly greater than the actual given. An opposite direction, although with a smaller gap, was found in relation to the family of the ex-spouse in which more support was given than was desired. In relation to all sources of support, single-parent mothers expressed more desire for support and also claimed they received more support than did single-parent fathers.

With regard to the 54 subjects who had entered a relationship with a new partner, a

significant difference was found between the support received from this new partner and that from other sources of support. The desired and actual support given by the new partner was far greater than the desired/actual support received from the other sources.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the study indicate that women express a greater desire for help than men from all the sources of support and that they actually receive more help.

Despite the unique situation of the single-parent father, in which he fills roles that diverge from the male stereotype, the traditional differences between the sexes in terms of seeking help are maintained (Clarke-Stewart & Bailey, 1989; Rice & Rice, 1986; Weitzman, 1985). Therefore, the divorce crisis results in the same help-seeking behavior as elicited by other crises (Dean & Ensel, 1982; Stokes & Wilson, 1984).

It seems that the gender variable is more dominant than the role variable. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the economic situation of divorced mothers worsens drastically after divorce. This may partially explain their greater need for support than men in the course of their adjustment.

Similarity between the request for help of fathers and mothers was found in only one subgroup in the study—those who had entered a relationship with a new partner. In times of stress, both men and women turn to their partners for help in similar ways. However, in our study, we found that a significant relationship with a new partner is more common among fathers than among mothers. The question is which came first: Did the need for a partner result from the need for support, or does the presence of a partner make it natural to turn to her first for support? in addition, mothers have more sources of support than do fathers. Our finding confirms those of other studies that indicate that men rely more on their partners for intimate support, whereas women turn to other women in their social network (Cronenweth & Funst-Wilson, 1981). The Burke and Weir (1982) study showed that women and men choose a partner to whom they can turn for help; however, women claimed that they prefer to turn to others, in addition to their husbands. These findings are also consistent with studies of support systems of parents with a handicapped child that discuss the problem faced by mothers who constitute the primary and sole source of support for their spouse (Schilling, Schinke & Kirkheim, 1985).

The support received and demanded from the family is the highest, followed by the support received from friends. This order of priorities in requesting and receiving support is compatible with the accepted model of requesting assistance. The difference is in the gap between the "desired" and the "actual." From friends, more support is desired than is provided. From the family of the ex-spouse, more support is provided than is desired.

Bell (1981) notes that one of the types of behavior expected from a friend is acceptance of the other; consequently, the divorced person is very interested in the support of friends during the period of adjustment to divorce. Chiriboga, Stein and Robert (1978) examined the sources and the uses that divorced people make of the social network. Their findings indicate that divorced people during the adjustment process prefer significantly to turn to friends more often than to any other support source. In Israel, where the social network is quite dense and where friendships are formed during significant periods of the life cycle, such as the period of military service, friends often find themselves in the throes of a loyalty dilemma. In many cases, friends are called on to adopt a clear stance of "loyalty" toward one or the other of the spouses. As a result of this dilemma, the friend hesitates to help, during the very period when the divorced person seeks support, even though friends usually give support unhesitatingly in other kinds of crises, such as sickness or loss.

Many couples often find themselves facing similar dilemmas and personal difficulties in their married lives. On the one hand, they envy the divorced friend's "courage" in obtaining a divorce, while, on the other hand, they are critical of him or her for placing individual interests above "family" values.

The need for the support of friends also results from the difficulty that divorced persons experience in again becoming dependent on their parents. Although the family constitutes a primary source of support, the boundaries between the original nuclear family and the newer extended family that were built and formed during the years of marriage must again be negotiated by the divorced person and his or her parents. The family support returns divorced persons to a new variation of the relationship they had with their parents before leaving home and getting married. The head of a single-parent family reopens his or her personal life to the scrutiny of the family. The opening of these borders threatens the divorced person or at least makes him or her reweigh the price extracted for such support (Johnson, 1988).

The subject of the support of the family becomes more complex in relation to the family of the ex-spouse. More attention has been paid to this aspect in the research literature during the past decade (Ambert, 1988). The results of our research show that the family of the ex-spouse is more willing to grant support than the head of the single-parent family is to receive such help. The divorce creates changes in the relationships within the marriage system. As part of these changes, the role of the members in the system who had played only a minor part in the decision to divorce also changes. Grandparents who have become ex-in-laws find it difficult to accept these changes and even harder to cope with them. They have "blood ties" with the grandchildren and a desire to maintain these relationships. According to this study, the desire to maintain, support, and help the grandchildren during this difficult period is in direct opposition to the desire of the family head to terminate the relationship. The involvement of the original family of the ex-spouse may delay the divorced person's adjustment to separation from the spouse and his or her progress in building a new life, as grandparents search for the right balance between assisting or interfering (Johnson, 1986).

Visitation rights with the grandchildren are sometimes specified as part of the divorce settlement (Wilks & Melville, 1990). In Israel, no empirical research has been conducted on grandparents' rights in studies on family support. Nor has this issue been stressed in Israeli divorce agreements. One possible explanation is that in Israel, the extended family is still too preoccupied with social attitudes and guilt feelings to focus on legalizing relationships with the family of origin.

With the increase in the number of couples seeking divorce and the attendant change in quality of the relationships among all members of the family system, we must consider the new family structure that is taking shape in a changing Jewish society. There is a need, therefore, to expand the field of research dealing with the attitudes of the extended family and how they cope with their children's divorces and remarriages. Such research is particularly important in a Jewish society, since its fundamental values are grounded in the family and one of its main goals is the transmission of Jewish tradition and religious values to the coming generations.

REFERENCES

Ambert, A. M. (1988). Relationship with former in-laws after divorce: A research note. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*, 679-686.

Ames, R., & Lau, S. (1982). An attributional analysis of student help-seeking in academic settings. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 74*, 414-423.

Bell, R. (1981). *Worlds of friendships*. London: Sage Publications.

Berman, W. H., & Turk, D. C. (1981). Adaptation to divorce: Problems and coping strategies. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 43*, 179-189.

Bowen, G. L. (1987). Single fathers in the Air Force. *Social Casework, 18*, 339-344.

Burke, R. I., & Weir, T. (1982). Husband-wife helping relationships as moderators of experienced stress: The "mental hygiene" function in marriage. In Flo I. McCubbin et al. (Eds.), *Family stress, coping and social support* (pp. 221-238). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Caplan, G. (1974). *Support systems and community mental health*. New York: Behavioral Publications.

Chiriboga, D., Stein, J., & Robert, J. (1978). Psychological well-being during marital separation. *Journal of Divorce, 2*, 21-36.

Clarke-Stewart, K. A., & Bailey, B. (1989). Adjusting to divorce: Why do men have it easier? *Journal of Divorce, 13*, 75-93.

Cohen, O. (1992). *The single-parent family: Concept of sex role, ways of coping and sense of well-being of divorced fathers and mothers raising their children themselves* (Hebrew text). Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

Coney, N., & Mackey, W. C. (1989). Perceptions of the problems of the divorced father. *Journal of Divorce, 13*, 81-95.

Cronenweth, L. R., & Funst-Wilson, W. (1981). Social support and the transition to fatherhood. *Nursing Research, 30*, 196-201.

Dean, A., & Ensel, W. M. (1982). Modelling social support, life events, competence, and depression in the context of age and sex. *Journal of Community Psychology, 10*, 392-408.

Gerstel, N. (1988). Divorce and kin ties: The importance of gender. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 50*, 209-219.

Golan, N. (1980). Intervention at time of transition: Sources and forms of help. *Social Casework, 61*, 259-266.

Greif, G. L. (1986). *Single fathers*. Boston: Lexington Books.

Holmes, T. H., & Raye, R. M. (1967). The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 11*, 213-218.

Johnson, P. J. (1986). Divorced mothers: Source of support for conflicts in responsibilities. *Journal of Divorce, 9*, 89-105.

Kaslow, F. W., & Schwartz, L. (1987). *The dynamics of divorce: A life cycle perspective*. New York: Brunner Mazel.

Luxemburg, A. (1987). *After divorce: The tie between involvement and level of adjustment of single-parent mothers* (Hebrew text). Unpublished M.A. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, Israel.

Mendes, H. (1976). Single fathers. *The Family Coordinator, 25*, 439-445.

Minuchin, S. (1984). *Family kaleidoscope*. (Hebrew text). Tel-Aviv: Happalim Library Publication.

Rice, J. K., & Rice, D. G. (1986). *Living through divorce*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Schilling, R. F., Schinke, S. P., & Kirkheim, M. A. (1985). Coping with a handicapped child: Differences between mothers and fathers. *Social Science Medicine, 21*, 857-863.

Spanier, G. B., & Hansen, S. (1981). The role of extended kin in adjustment to marital separation. *Journal of Divorce, 5*, 33-49.

Stokes, J. P., & Wilson, D. G. (1984). The inventory of socially supportive behaviors: Dimensionality, prediction, and gender differences. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 12*, 53-69.

Wallerstein, J. S. (1986). Woman after divorce: Preliminary report from a ten-year follow-up. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 56*, 65-77.

Weitzman, L. J. (1985). *The divorce revolutions: The unexpected social and economic consequences for women and children in America*. New York: The Free Press.

Wilcox, B. (1981). The role of social support in adjusting to marital disruption: A network analysis. In B.H. Gottlieb (Ed.), *Social networks and social support* (pp. 97-116). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Wilks, C., & Melville, C. (1990). Grandparents in custody and access disputes. *Journal of Divorce, 13*, 1-14.