

THE POSTDIVORCE ADJUSTMENT OF MIDDLE CLASS BLACK WOMEN

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The postdivorce adjustment of the black population has been largely ignored by researchers and clinicians alike. When divorce is considered as a phenomenon in this country and among the black population in particular, it is difficult to understand the paucity of in-depth information on the subject. The literature has cited divorce as the second most stress-producing life-change, surpassed only by death of a spouse (Pais & White, 1979; Bernard, 1978). Additionally, adjustment to divorce has been found to affect mental and physical health (Kraus, 1979). For example, divorced or separated persons are disproportionately represented in patient populations - the admission rate is approximately six times as high among them as that of married persons. They contribute disproportionately to mental illness, committed suicides, acute conditions, chronic problems and convictions of crimes. Higher levels of alcohol consumption, excessive vulnerability to motor vehicle accidents and higher death rates due to physical disease are characteristics of divorced populations.

Although the divorce rate in the U.S. has decreased in recent years (5.3/1000 married persons with spouse present in 1980 to 5.0/1000 in 1985), there are still approximately 1,187,000 people who have had the experience (National Center for Health Statistics, 1985). An examination of divorce rates reveals that blacks are more than twice as likely to divorce than whites. In 1985 black persons had 326 divorces for every 1000 married persons as compared with 142/1000 for their white counterparts (Bureau of the Census, 1985).

Marital disruption has been cited as the best single predictor of social disequilibrium (Kraus, 1979). Although it is a period of psychological vulnerability, it is also a period of opportunity for personal growth; "... a crisis is a call to new action: the challenge it provokes may bring forth new coping mechanisms which serve to strengthen the

individual's adaptive capacity and thereby in general raise his level of mental health" (Rappoport, 1962, p. 212). Hence, the importance of establishing factors correlated with adequate adjustment can readily be discerned. Much of the previous research on post-divorce adjustment has ignored the black population. Therefore, this study sought to determine, relative to black middle class women, if a relationship existed between postdivorce adjustment and the following variables: social supports, religious affiliation and commitment to religion, and sex role attitudes and expectations.

Review of the Literature

Social supports have been found to make the transition from being married to being divorced easier, the crucial factor appearing to be the availability of some type of support (Granvold, Pedler and Schellie, 1979; Spanier and Bryson, 1979; Raschke, 1979). The church has been identified as one of these supports which is of particular significance to black women. Black divorced women have been found to attend church more often and to perceive themselves as more influenced in their daily lives by their religious beliefs than white divorced women. Other literature indicates that it is not church attendance alone, but also one's feeling of having done the right thing, one's denomination and the approval of one's reference group (Goode, 1956; Spanier, 1979).

Sex role attitudes and expectations have also been found to affect postdivorce adjustment. Granvold, Pedler and Schellie (1979) found women with more egalitarian attitudes (flexibility; role sharing and equal status among partners) to be better adjusted than women with less egalitarian ones. Additionally, women with "traditional" sex role attitudes (sex role differentiation with the male being the breadwinner and decision maker and the wife being the nurturer and emotional caretaker) have been found to feel less internally controlled (that is a feeling of personal effectiveness and control over her immediate life circumstances), more distress and less personal growth during marital dissolution than nontraditional women (Brown, Perry, & Harburg, 1977). In the same study traditional black women (those whose basic sense of

satisfaction and identity come from the wife and mother role) were found to be more externally controlled and more inner directed (their behavior being primarily motivated by personal as opposed to externally defined pressures) than nontraditional black women (those who acknowledge a need for individual achievement and autonomy).

It is apparent from the literature that the variables proposed, i.e. social supports, religious affiliation and commitment and sex role attitudes and expectations are relevant to postdivorce adjustment. Although much of the previous research has been exclusive of blacks, other studies have verified the importance of the variables in the lives of black people. Robert Hill (in Pinkney, 1975) has identified strong kinship bonds (a form of social support) as one of the strengths of black families. Carol Stack (1974) in her study of a black community found mutual trust, mutual aid, and means of acquiring self-esteem among kin and friends. In contrast with the above, Liebow (1967) found that although resources in the street-corner world were almost entirely based on personal relationships, these relationships often did not stand up during times of crisis or conflict of interest.

Relative to religion, one of the oldest and most persistent characteristics of Black Americans is that they are very religious (Thompson, 1974). Second only to the family, the black church has had the greatest influence in the social, cultural, and psychological maturation of black people (Frazier, 1974). Religion provides a cathartic outlet and in addition to enlistment of supernatural forces for aid, it can strengthen self-esteem, can strengthen ties with a supportive group, resolve certain intrapersonal conflicts, promote personality integration and generally gratify important psychological needs and promote effective functioning (Frank, 1973). The black church is viewed as a place where problems can be discussed and where escape from feelings of alienation and insecurity can be found (Thompson, 1974).

In regard to sex role expectations and attitudes, black women have been found to be more traditional in

their sex role attitudes than white women (Gump, 1975). Bernard (1966) has stated that traditional and unrealistic expectations about marriage and male-female roles and relationships almost always lead to subsequent dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction tends to exist in proportion to the expectation--the more one expects and the greater the need to have the expectation met, the more disillusioned one is likely to be when the expectations are not realized. Kitson and Sussman (1977) found a sense of relief and fewer symptoms of mental disturbance among those divorced persons who had been chronically frustrated or irritated with the spouse or marriage.

Methodology

Sample Selection

A purposive non-probability method was used to obtain a sample of 60 black women. The public divorce records at the Los Angeles County Courthouse were utilized as well as referrals from women contacted. Sample requirements were that the women must be at least 21 years of age; married for at least two years prior to the divorce; this had to be their first divorce, having been divorced at least 6 weeks and no longer than 3 years; and only black women married to black men were accepted for this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected during face to face interviews. Several instruments were used. A modified version of the Pattison Psychosocial Kinship Inventory (1975) was used to collect the social support data. Questions were added to obtain information regarding the respondents' religious denominations, frequency of church attendance, their church's teachings regarding divorce, beliefs regarding divorce and adherence to their church's teachings.

Brown, Perry and Harburg (1977) developed the sex role attitudes instrument used in the research. The SCL-90-R (Derogatis, Rickels, and Rock, 1976) was used to measure adjustment. In addition, demographic information was obtained regarding the respondents'

divorce situation and their personal, family and former husbands' backgrounds.

Findings

Background Information

The sample consisted of 60 black women whose mean age was 33.8 years and whose mean age at the time of divorce was 32.9. The mean age when married was 23.6. The mean length of marriage was 9 years and 6 months with the mean length of time since the marital separation being 35.4 months (2 years and 11 months). The period from the time of the divorce to the time of the interview ranged from 6 weeks to 3 years. This means the period of time from the date the divorce was final to the time of the interview. The mean length of time since the divorce was 42 weeks (10 1/2 months).

The Hollingshead Two-Factor Index (1957) was used to determine occupation, education and class status. In terms of occupation, the Index includes 7 categories, with this sample falling within categories 2-6. The median occupational category was number 4 (clerical and sales workers and technicians). The median education was 1-3 years of college. The class statuses of the sample were as follows: 61.67% were of class III; 21% were of class II; and 18.33% were of class IV. None of the respondents fell into class I or V. The median was class III.

Seventy-one and seven tenths percent of these women were Protestant; 11.7% were Catholic; 13.3% named some other denomination such as Muslim, Religious Science, etc., and 3.3% stated that they were of no religious denomination.

Findings in Regard to Study Variables

The purpose of this research was to examine the postdivorce adjustment of middle class black women. The SCL-90-R was used to measure adjustment. It is a 90-item self-report symptom inventory which is designed to reflect psychosocial symptom patterns. The respondent is required to respond to each item in terms of a five point scale of distress, ranging from "not at all" to "extremely." These items were scored

in terms of three global indices of distress: the Global Severity Index (GSI), the Positive Symptom Total (PST), the Positive Symptom Distress Index (PSDI) and nine primary symptom dimensions. "The GSI represents the best single indicator of the current level of depth of the disorder (psychopathology)" and was therefore used as the measure of adjustment in this study (Derogatis, 1977, p. 12). The PST is a count of the number of complaints the individual reports as experiencing. The PSDI, as an intensity measure, functions to communicate whether the person is "augmenting or attenuating" their report of distress.

The score range of the GSI and PSDI is 0-4, while the score range of the PST is 0-90. On each of the above indices, the sample's scores ranged from 0-2, 1-3 and 1-68 respectively.

While comparison with normative scores was not a focus of the study, the global scores of the sample were compared with the global scores of Derogatis' sample of the normative population of nonpatients (1977). The sample compared as follows:

Table 1

Sample Global Scores and Normative Population Percentages That Scored the Same or Lower.

Globals	Mean Samples Score	% Score in Derogates's Sample
GSI	0.55	59a
PSDI	1.55	56
PST	29.08	56

aWhen the raw score of the sample was not listed, the percentage for the normative population was interpolated from the table values available.

As can be seen, somewhat over half of the normative population scored the same or less than this sample. This means that approximately one half of Derogatis' sample experiences less symptoms of pathology than this sample.

The independent variables, social supports, were measured in terms of the number of significant persons in the respondent's life as well as the amount of contact with the persons named, the amount of physical and emotional help received from them and the likelihood of going to the person named if assistance was needed.

For each person named by the respondent, a contact, physical help, emotional support, and likelihood (of going to that person if the respondent needed help) rating was obtained. The range of ratings was 1-5, with 5 indicating very frequent contact, physical help, emotional support and high likelihood of that person being called upon if help was needed and 1 indicating none at all on each item. The median was calculated in each area. The range of scores for frequency of contact was 0-49 with a median of 17.33. For the emotional support total, the range was 0-69, the median being 23.00. The score range for the likelihood total was 0-58 with a median of 19.25. An intercorrelation of the social support variables--contact, physical help, emotional support and likelihood of going to the important people in their lives if help was needed--revealed them to be strongly, positively correlated.

Religious affiliation and commitment was measured by items developed by the researcher. One score within a 1-4 range on attendance and adherence to church teachings were obtained. A four is representative of frequent church attendance and adherence while one represents no attendance and adherence. The median score on church attendance was 2.94 which meant that most of the women attended church at least once a month. The median score on adherence to church teaching was 3.07 which meant that most of the women adhere to the teachings of the church at least sometimes. A significant finding was that although there were some women who stated that they never attended church, there was not one woman who stated that she never adhered to the teaching of the church.

Additionally, the largest percentage of the women (28.3%) stated that their churches taught that divorce was all right under certain circumstances. Nine women

said that their churches taught it was absolutely wrong. In contrast, the largest majority of the women (76.7%) believed themselves that divorce should be left to the individuals involved with only two women who said they believed divorce was absolutely wrong. Correlations (Pearson's r) of the above variables with postdivorce adjustment revealed only that those who adhered less to the teachings of the church were less well adjusted ($r = -.38$, $N = 60$, $p < .00$).

A regression of the GSI scores on the variables revealed that stronger adherence to the teachings of the church was related to better adjustment as was acceptance of the divorce ($R = .46$, $F_{2,57} = 7.67$, $p < .001$). This indicates that the women whose actions were congruent with what the church taught experienced better adjustment than women whose actions were adverse to what the church taught--in this case, getting a divorce.

The second research question examined the relationship between postdivorce adjustment and sex role attitudes and expectations. Sex role attitudes were measured using Brown, Perry and Harburg's 18 item index (1977) with one additional item developed by the researcher. The respondents were asked to agree or disagree with each item on a 4-point scale from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." An example of these items is: "The needs of a family should come before a woman's personal ambitions." The score range is 19-76. A high score indicates traditional attitudes and a low score indicates egalitarian attitudes toward sex roles. Scores ranged from 25-52, with a median score of 39.83. On the basis of the median score, the respondents were divided into traditional and egalitarian groups. Twenty-nine (48.3%) of the women were thus classified as egalitarian while 31 (51.7%) were traditional in their attitudes. A t -test yielded no significant differences between the egalitarian and traditional women.

Sixteen items were developed by the researcher to measure sex role expectations. Two scores were determined: one for level of expectation and one for met or unmet expectations. To obtain a level score, the respondent was provided with certain values (i.e.

"Do you feel that the wife should not have to work in a marriage?") and asked to agree or disagree (yes or no respectively) with the values. A one was assigned each time the respondent answered yes to the question; when the reply was "No," it was ignored. The score range was 0-8. Scores ranged from 4-8 with a median score of 6.69. The majority of the women had high levels of expectations.

A Pearson r revealed a slightly significant relationship between level of expectation and postdivorce adjustment ($p < .06$) which indicated that the higher the level of expectations (the more expectations the women had) the greater the pathology.

To examine whether these expectations were met in the respondent's marriage or not, two categories were developed: unmet expectations and met ones. Frequencies were done for both categories. The score range in each category was 0-8. Under the unmet category, 0 represents no unmet expectations and 8 is indicative of many unmet ones. Under the met expectations category, 0 represents no met expectations and 8 is indicative of many met expectations. These women had more unmet expectations than met ones with a median score of 4.28 in the unmet category and 2.04 in the met one. A 2-way ANOVA showed no significant relationship between adjustment, level of expectation and whether or not they are met.

The variables were correlated with the symptom dimensions of the adjustment measure. The dimensions are Somatization, Obsessive-compulsive, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Depression, Anxiety, Hostility, Phobic Anxiety, Paranoid Ideation and Psychoticism (Derogatis, 1977). Somatization reflects distress arising from perceptions of bodily dysfunctions. Obsessive-compulsive represents thoughts, impulses and actions that are experienced as unremitting and irresistible by the individual but are ego-alien or unwanted. Interpersonal Sensitivity focuses on feelings of personal inadequacy and inferiority (particularly in comparison to others), self-deprecation, feelings of uneasiness, marked discomfort during interpersonal interactions, acute self-consciousness and negative expectations concerning the communications and interpersonal behaviors with

others. Depression is characterized by symptoms of dysphoric mood and affect, signs of withdrawal of life interests, lack of motivation, loss of vital energy, feelings of hopelessness and thoughts of suicide. Anxiety is symptoms and signs such as nervousness, tension and trembling, panic attacks and feelings of terror that manifest anxiety. Hostility is viewed as the negative affect state of anger such as aggression, irritability, rage and resentment. These are reflected through thoughts, feelings, or actions. Phobic Anxiety is defined as a persistent fear related to a specific person, place, object or situation. This fear is irrational and disproportionate to the stimulus and leads to avoidance or escape. Paranoid Ideation is defined as a disordered mode of thinking characterized by projective thought, hostility, suspiciousness, grandiosity, centrality, fear of loss of autonomy and delusions. Psychoticism is defined in terms of certain behaviors. These include withdrawal, isolation, schizoid life style and other symptoms of schizophreniz such as hallucination and thought-broadcasting. The psychoticism scale represents a continuum from mild interpersonal alienation to dramatic evidence of psychosis.

Correlations of the variables with the dimensions of the adjustment measure revealed those women who had less contact with, less physical and emotional help from and less likelihood of going to the significant people in their lives experienced more paranoid ideation and those who had less emotional support experienced more psychoticism. Those women who viewed their church as teaching against divorce were also more likely to be obsessive-compulsive, interpersonally sensitive, depressed, anxious, hostile, phobic and to have paranoid ideations. The women who adhered less to the teachings of the church were more interpersonally sensitive ($r = -.39, p < .00$), depressed ($r = -.45, p < .00$), phobic anxious ($r = -.20, p < .06$), suffered from paranoid ideation ($r = -.39, p < .00$) and were more psychotic ($r = -.34, p < .00$). Additionally, those women who believed that divorce was wrong tended to suffer from somatization ($r = .22, p < .05$). In each case $N = 60$.

An intercorrelation of the independent variables yielded the following results:

- 1) Those women whose churches taught against divorce had less contact with the important people in their lives ($r = -.23$, $N = 59$, $p = .04$);
- 2) Those women whose churches taught against divorce also were less likely to go to the important people in their lives if they needed help ($r = -.23$, $N = 59$, $p = .04$);
- 3) Those women who attended church more and those whose churches taught against divorce had more of their expectations unmet ($r = .31$, $N = 60$, $p = .01$; $r = .21$, $N = 60$, $p = .06$ respectively);
- 4) Those women who adhered to the teachings of the church were more traditional in their sex role attitudes ($r = .30$, $N = 60$, $p = .01$) and
- 5) Those women who had more of their expectations unmet were more traditional in their sex role attitudes ($r = .28$, $N = 60$, $p = .02$).

An overall regression of the GSI on contact, physical help, emotional support, likelihood of utilizing the significant persons in their life for help, church attendance, church teachings, personal beliefs, adherence to church's teachings, sex role attitudes, level of expectations and met and unmet expectations revealed only adherence to church's teachings and church's teachings regarding divorce to be predictive of postdivorce adjustment; the other variables did not add any predictive power.

Additional Information

Ninety-five percent of the sample stated they felt better off since the divorce, most frequently giving their independence and the absence of conflict as the reasons. Of the 3 women who stated that they felt worse off than before, one stated that it was due to loneliness; one stated that it was due to her fear of dating and finding someone else. Regarding what was hardest in making an adjustment to the divorce, the sample's more frequent response was loneliness (given by 11 women) and the second most frequent reply was "Nothing" (given by 3 women). The other 41 responses were varied.

The majority of the women in the sample stated that black women feeling their worth (10, 16.7%, N = 60), realizing their abilities (10, 16.7%, N = 60), and secondly (in terms of percentage), having some emotional support from family and friends (5, 8.3%, N = 60) might be helpful for black women in making an adjustment to the divorce.

A little over half (55%) of the women in the sample felt that there was some aspect of their experience that had been specifically related to being a black woman as compared to 45% who did not. Of those who felt that the experience had unique aspects for them as black women, the most frequent responses were "Limitations in Resources" and "Dealing with Black Men's Insecurities" (7 and 7 respectively, N = 60).

Lastly, the data revealed some general information about these women: 1) they were higher in occupational categories (according to Hollingshead's occupational categories) at the time of the interview than when they were married; and (2) they had more education than their former husbands and their education had increased since their divorce.

Additional Issues For The Black Women

Over one half of Derogatis' non-patient sample (1977) scored the same as or lower than the author's sample on the adjustment measure, i.e. a little less than one half of the normative population sample suffers from less emotional difficulty.

There are a number of factors which might account for this. One such factor has been delineated by Carrington (1980) who views black women in America as in a state of "double jeopardy." She views the status of black females as being at the lowest rung on the political and economic ladder, views them as holding powerless roles in society and as living under restrictive and constrictive conditions. Even with women who have lucrative professions, who are regarded highly by their peers and colleagues, who have positive relationships with them, and who are physically attractive, seeds of unworthiness and despair are carried deep within. Depression appears

to have a higher incidence among these women. It is not unlikely that a higher incidence of emotional difficulty might be found among divorced black women. It is also quite possible that many of the women in the sample are still dealing with the emotional ramifications (guilt, sense of failure, loss, loneliness, etc.) of the divorce.

Part of the dissatisfaction that black women feel in their marriages stems from the discrepancy between what they expect from their husbands and what they receive. Black women have been reported as more dissatisfied with 5 out of 6 aspects of their marriages than white women (Brown, Perry and Harburg, 1977). Possibly the dissatisfaction is related to expectations held about the marriage. It is felt that the pragmatic functions of the family (provision of food, shelter, clothing, and protection) are primarily allotted, by society, as the male's responsibility. Information obtained from this study and other literature indicates that black women's expectations of their husbands reflect the expectations of the broader society. Because of the discriminatory position held by black people in this society, it is difficult for many black males to meet these expectations. A black woman's higher educational and occupational level may result in a higher likelihood of exacerbating these expectations and increasing the likelihood that they will not be met because of the difficulty in finding blacks with the economic resources to accomplish society's male role. A black woman in this situation may have to evaluate her relationship with the black male in terms that are realistic and take into consideration the economic disenfranchisement under which the black male is carrying out his role responsibilities. Her expectations may have to be altered, she may choose to remain single, or experience a state of distress and depression from the unfulfilled expectation. Either would have an impact on the family.

Implications

It is apparent from the results of the research that social support is important to divorced black women; therefore, support groups or networks must be an integral aspect of the therapeutic approach.

Heretofore, religion has not been a factor seriously considered in postdivorce adjustment; yet it is apparent that particularly with black women, religion is a crucial element that must be appreciated. Among the things that should be explored are the doctrines of their church, personal beliefs about divorce and any discrepancy between the two. Since it may be that many of these women's personal beliefs, sex role attitudes and expectations have religious foundations, ministers and/or other religious personnel might prove to be a valuable resource. Postdivorce counseling within the church might be valuable intervention for some sub-populations of black divorcing women.

Other factors that must be viewed in terms of their uniqueness to black women are sex role expectations. Crucial to recovery is exploration of the reality of expectations being met and/or unmet. It has been found that many black wives hold unrealistic expectations of their husbands (such as financial support of her and her children), particularly when one considers his ability to fulfill them (Scanzoni, 1971; Liebow, 1967; Poussaint, 1974). This exploration of expectations is also appropriate in pre-marital and marital counseling. Caution is advised in that initial efforts should be directed toward helping the divorced women to deal with the here and now of the divorce.

The experience of the black woman must be taken into consideration. They may need help in order to feel the pride and self-worth that can come through realization of their abilities, contributions and value. Since higher educational and occupational levels have been associated with well-being, especially for black women, (Brown, Perry and Harburg, 1977) this appears to be an opportune time for these women to become involved in activities that will increase these levels and, consequently, their feelings of self-worth/esteem. These activities may have a two-fold purpose of providing support. Practitioners may prove helpful as a source of encouragement and as resource persons in terms of helping the women to identify areas they wish to explore and in helping them find the resources needed to pursue their interests.

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