

**CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCES OF DIVORCE IN BOTSWANA**

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores children and mothers' perceptions of children's experiences of divorce in Botswana. To illuminate this complex topic, the study draws on two main overlapping theoretical perspectives. These are the social constructionist approach and the sociology of childhood approach. The concept of resilience as well as some concepts of feminist theory, social network theory and family stress theory were also used in the study.

The study is qualitative in nature. In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 60 people from 25 families who had experienced separation four or less years from the time of the interviews. One mother and one of her children were interviewed in each family. In addition, a total of ten siblings from ten of the 25 families participated in the study. The children were between the ages of ten and 21. Mothers were selected through a search of the Lobatse high court and some Gaborone customary courts separation and divorce records. Mothers were approached and told about the study and if they agreed to participate, their permission to let children participate was sought. In families where there was more than one child between the ages of ten and 21, the older child was interviewed. This was in accordance with mothers' preferences. Most mothers suggested that interviews should be conducted with older children because younger ones would either not be able to understand some of the issues discussed as they were too young when the separation took place or would not cope because the interview may make them sad.

Permission of ten of the 25 mothers was sought to interview two of their children. These mothers pointed out from the onset that more than one of their children were willing and available to participate in the interviews or who felt that it was in the best interest of the child to participate in the interview. My approach to analysis was guided by Marshall and Rossman (1989)'s ideas of data reduction and interpretation.

The study found that a majority of children perceived the effects of the divorce process on them as mixed. In other words, positive experiences were often offset by negative ones. A majority of children in this study witnessed parental violence for many years prior to their parents' divorce, and perceived it as the most stressful experience. Economic hardships that accompanied the divorce were also perceived as stressful by a large number of children. Other experiences that were perceived as

stressful by some children were the absence of fathers from homes, lack of informational and emotional support, changes in relations with family and social network members as well as changes of neighbourhoods and schools.

Although children felt that some of their experiences were distressing, they were not passive subjects in the process of their parents' separation, but were active agents. They took measures to influence their experiences in ways that were favourable to them. For example, some tried to convince their mothers to leave the marital homes because of violence, some intervened in situations of parental violence and others persistently asked their mothers questions about what was happening and its implications. However, children's efforts were not always successful. Sometimes they were hindered by the beliefs and images that their parents (especially mothers) had of childhood and which children themselves held of parents, as well as by their inferior position and lack of power relative to adults. Evidence that children were active agents in their parents' separation is also shown by the way children were able to articulate their experiences and how they believed they affected them. By and large, children were able to provide more vivid and detailed accounts of the above issues than their mothers. Most mothers were not fully aware of how separation and its related experiences had affected children.

Despite children's perceptions of some of their experiences as stressful, some believed they coped well, and that the effects were short-term. In fact several children believed they benefited from the divorce in that it made them more mature, it led to some improvements in their relationships with their mothers and also taught them some lessons that would benefit them in future.

A few children believed their experiences had long-term effects on them. These were mainly children who experienced multiple stressors. For example, they perceived: their relations with mothers (who were their custodial parents) as negative, their relations with fathers were not close, they believed they experienced severe economic declines, they changed neighbourhoods and schools many times, witnessed and / or were victims of parental violence either for many years prior to the separation or continued to be exposed to violence even after the legal divorce.

This study has explored an issue that remains largely unexplored in developing

countries. Some of its findings are similar in broad terms to those of studies that have been conducted in developed countries, but they manifest themselves differently. For example, women in this study stayed in unhappy marriages for many years partly because of lack of services for them, customary laws that make divorce more difficult for women than for men, cultural expectations that require women to persevere in order to preserve their marriages and fear of stigma as well as economic hardships. Therefore when violence occurred, its impact on their children can be much more severe compared to their counterparts in developed countries.

Findings of this study are also manifested differently from those of studies from developed countries in relation to children's experiences of economic hardship during the post-divorce period. Studies from both developing and developed countries attest to the low family income in maternal custody families following divorce. However, children in developing countries such as Botswana experience more severe economic hardships than their counterparts in developed countries because welfare programmes in the countries are less generous and the criteria used to determine eligibility exclude able-bodied unemployed mothers. The major policy implications arising from this study that need close attention therefore are: the need to improve the economic circumstances of children, the need to reduce if not eliminate children's exposure to parental violence, as well as the need to educate parents about how they can help their children to cope with the divorce process.



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## Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis embodies the results of my own special work, that it has been composed by myself and that it does not include work forming part of a thesis presented successfully for a degree in this or another university.

Signature

Tapologo Maundeni

*T. Maundeni*

# CHAPTER 1

## Introduction

“When people think of developing countries, their image is often of standards of living lower than Europe or the United States, perhaps inadequate road systems, questionable water supplies and the like. These stereotypes often result in people losing sight of the human stories that come out of these cultures. It is possible to focus on economic conditions and miss the urgent social and interpersonal issues that are present” (Wintersteen et al, 1997: 191).

### *Statement of the problem*

This study aimed to explore children’s <sup>1</sup> experiences of parental separation and divorce <sup>2</sup> from the viewpoints of children themselves and their custodial mothers. Three main themes have permeated the development of this study. First, focus on children’s experiences of divorce is justified by the reported increase in divorce in Botswana (Murray, 1981; Ahmed and Letamo, 1989; Bhebhe and Mosha, 1996). Second, the inspiration for this study came from a review of literature which shows that no study has been done on children’s experiences of divorce in Botswana. Last, findings from developed countries, especially America which show that divorce and marital separation are second to the death of a parent as stressful events for youngsters (Coddington, 1972; Goldman and King, 1985) have led to this study.

### *Questions which this study sought to answer*

Using a social constructionist approach, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Children in the context of this study refers to all young people who participated in the study. They were between the ages of 10 and 21.

<sup>2</sup> Divorce in the context of this study is conceptualised as a process which sets in motion other events which are likely to affect children. It is a complex sequence of experiences, rather than a unitary phenomenon. These experiences include: conflict and violence in the family, the departure of one parent from the home, changes in schools and neighbourhoods, adaptation to life in either a single-parent household or a stepfamily as well as adaptation to changes in relationships with family and social network members (also see Felner et al, 1980; Wertlieb, 1997).



1. What are the effects (both positive and negative) of separation, divorce and related processes on children?
2. What is the role of children's family and wider social network members in their adjustment to divorce and separation?
3. How and for what reasons were children's experiences of parental separation and divorce perceived differently. (Concern here is with social, emotional and material processes)

No formal hypothesis regarding the nature of children's experiences was preconceived. Rather the study aimed at capturing respondents' accounts of children's experiences of divorce. My main interest was the meaning children attached to their experiences.

In this chapter, I discuss the following issues: background information about Botswana; why a study of divorce and children in a developing country is important; family-related changes in Botswana and how they may affect the lives of children of divorced parents, marriage and divorce procedures in Botswana. Finally, I highlight theoretical and conceptual issues guiding the study and conclude the chapter with an outline of the thesis.

## ***Background information about Botswana***

### **Country size and population**

In order to understand the context in which this study took place, it is important to discuss the country background as the study of children and divorce is embedded in it. Botswana is located in the Southern part of Africa, sharing borders with South Africa, Zambia, Namibia and Zimbabwe. The area of Botswana is about 582 000 square kilometers. Botswana is about the size of the state of Texas in the United States or Kenya in Africa, but has a far smaller population compared to the above two countries. Its population is approximately 1.4 million (Government of Botswana, 1991). Available figures show an annual population growth rate of 3.48% between 1981 and 1991. A large percentage of the population is children. In 1991, for example, 43.6% of the population were between the ages of 0 and 14 years (Lesetedi and Ngcongco, 1995).

There are eight officially recognised ethnic groups in Botswana, all of which speak the same language - Setswana. There are, however, a few tribes which have their own languages, but in order for the members of such tribes to integrate well with the mainstream society, they are required to speak the majority language (the one that is spoken by most people in the country). Unlike other African countries where there are often tribal conflicts / wars and animosities, the tribes in Botswana are free from such circumstances (Thunberg, 1978).

### **Economic background of the country**

Botswana was one of the poorest countries in the world when it achieved independence in 1966. However, it has now been transformed into the richest economy in Southern Africa (excluding South Africa) and is one of the few African economies to be classified by the World Bank and the United Nations as an 'upper-middle-income' country (Hope, 1996). The economic success of Botswana has been attributed among other things, to the country's resources and political stability. The country exports minerals to other countries. Diamond-generated wealth has given Botswana one of the highest foreign exchange reserves in the world. Botswana also exports beef to European countries. Mining has to an extent reduced Botswana's dependency upon foreign financial assistance. Botswana has also made considerable progress in the provision of social services since independence.

### **Problems of unemployment and poverty**

Despite the country's economic success, there are still problems of unemployment, poverty and inequality. Unemployment in Botswana tends to be higher among women than among men. The high unemployment rate among women results in more women living in poverty than men, and this often leads to a high number of children living in poverty since during divorce, most women are given custody of children. In 1981, the unemployment rate for females was 25.3%, while that of males was 7.8%. In 1991, the gap between the female unemployment rate and that of males had narrowed. For females, the rate was 17.3%, while for males, it increased to 11.3% (Hope, 1996). Furthermore, men tend to dominate the higher-paid occupations. The largest employment category for women is domestic work, which is associated with little regulation / security and low wages (Lesetedi and Ngcongco, 1995). The above figures showing the discrepancies between the unemployment rates of men and

women have serious implications for the welfare of children, particularly in the correlation of unemployment and poverty. More than half of the rural population, and a considerable proportion of the urban population, have incomes, which are inadequate to meet basic needs. More specifically, 64 % of people in rural areas live below the poverty datum line, while 30% of those in urban areas live below the poverty datum line (Republic of Botswana, 1991; Hope, 1996).

The large difference between the unemployment rate for men and women has been attributed to the following factors: first, men have more job opportunities open to them compared to women. This is particularly because of the heavy, construction nature of some of the jobs. In addition, men are able to use skills from formal employment in part-time work, e.g. builders, carpenters, mechanics and as drivers (Cooper, 1979). Cooper therefore concluded that “women without any education beyond primary school lived an even more insecure and marginal existence than the lowest level of unskilled male worker in the multinational or state sectors” (p29).

Secondly, differences in educational attainments between men and women have been found to account for the gap. Generally more males in Botswana than females manage to attain higher levels of education. For example, in 1991, there were 15, 037 male wage earners in the economically active population who had completed secondary school compared to 8 717 females. Similarly, there were 11, 122 male wage earners who had attained a tertiary education compared to 5 485 females (Hope, 1996). The difference in the numbers of females and males who attain higher education is quite high. The figures are not consistent with the existing trend whereby more girls than boys start secondary school. Research shows that although more girls than boys start secondary school, more girls drop out before the examinations and they perform poorly in the examinations. The low number of girls who complete secondary school has been attributed to differences in socialisation practices of girls and boys in Botswana (Enge, 1982). In her study of women in Botswana, Enge found that girls are socialised to value marriage and childbearing more than education. She however contends that “recently ideas of education and career have become part of girls’ plans for the future” (p73). The high rate of teenage pregnancy in the country also contributes to the low number of girls who complete secondary school.



## ***Is a study of children and divorce in a developing country important?***

Most research on divorce has been conducted in developed countries, partly because it has been assumed that lower divorce rates prevail in developing countries because women have limited opportunities outside the home, hence they are more likely to stay in unhappy marriages (Amato, 1994). Recent evidence from some developing countries (South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Lesotho and Botswana) indicates that the divorce rate is increasing and that the marriage institution is now less stable than it used to be (United Nations, 1967; Simon, 1968; Klingshirn, 1971; Iro, 1976; Omideyi, 1986; Burman and Fuchs, 1986; Ahmed and Letamo, 1989; Solivetti, 1994; Bhebhe and Mosha, 1996). It is however difficult for researchers to know the exact divorce rates of most developing countries. There are several reasons for this. Firstly, record keeping in developing countries is generally poor. Some courts do not keep records of the number of divorce cases that they handle. In Botswana for example, information on the total number of children affected by divorce is not readily available from published sources. The central statistics office produces population census reports every ten years, but the reports do not reveal information on the number of children whose parents have divorced. The reports only provide information on the number of adults who are divorced. The absence of children from official statistics and social accounting methods shows that children are marginalised. This is a function of their conceptual marginality in everyday life ( James and Prout, 1997). In addition, the reports are produced every ten years, therefore they do not show up-to-date information / figures. Secondly, census data does not include divorced persons who remarried. Thirdly, some people divorce using customary ways of divorce, and such records are unreliable as not all divorces are recorded. Finally, some people separate permanently without going through any legal channels. This is partly because they cannot afford the financial costs involved.

The fact that some people do not go through the legal process of divorce has implications for women because they may then get a very small share of the marital property if any. A typical example is of a couple living in a rural area and owning livestock. The couple also owns a house in the city that it has rented out. When this couple separates permanently without utilising the legal system, the woman may end up getting little or none of the livestock. The woman, rather than the man is the one who is likely to get a smaller share of the joint property in this case for several



reasons: first, in the Botswana culture, it is rare for women (probably because of socialisation) to go frequently to the kraals<sup>3</sup> to check on the livestock. It is regarded as the duty of men to take care of livestock and in most cases, only men know how many animals they own, how many have given birth, etc. Cattle in Botswana are a measure of wealth and social status, and these qualities are associated with men. Therefore women who show interest in cattle are perceived as invading the men's domain. As such most "women voluntarily relinquish their rights over cattle to their male family members" (Kidd et al, 1997: 72). This illustrates how gender based economic and social conditions influence marriage and separation.

Second, the common law of marriage in Botswana places restrictions on the capacity of women to acquire and control property. When women marry in community of property, they are joint owners of the family property with their husbands and are entitled to a half share of it at the end of the marriage. This type of marriage creates problems because it makes the husband 'senior partner' in the marriage by giving him what is known as the 'marital power' over the family property (Molokomme, 1987b). In the case discussed above, the house will be registered in the man's name because until 1997 the common law did not allow women to register immovable property in their names. The deeds registry act required only the signature of the husband for the registration of any dealing affecting the property and the consent of the wife was not a requirement. The man could sell it without the woman's consent. Since women are given custody of children most of the time when divorce takes place, children are likely to suffer economically, as they are left with parents (women) without financial backing and then men walk away and yet they are the ones with resources to help. The law regarding married women's registration of property in their names, however, was amended in 1997 (see, the Botswana Deeds Registry Act), and now married women are allowed to register property in their names. Despite this amendment, married women who want to change registration of ownership of property such as plots from their husbands' names encounter difficulties in doing so because of the expenses involved. Women have to pay legal fees, as well as incur administrative costs. The costs of the above exercise depend on the value of the plot and house on it. But, generally it involves a lot of money, considering the fact that more women than men earn low wages in Botswana.

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<sup>3</sup> Places where livestock is kept.

It should however be noted that there is a legal clinic of the University of Botswana based in the capital city (Gaborone) which among other things offers legal services to divorced people who cannot afford to pay for private attorneys. Since the legal clinic is based in the capital city, people who live far from the capital city may not be able to afford to travel to the capital city to utilise its services. As earlier indicated, Botswana is a big country (582 000 square kilometers), therefore it can be expensive for people to travel from a village as far as 400 kilometers away to Gaborone. Furthermore, some people may not be aware of the services offered by the clinic. In addition, some may not have relatives and friends in the capital city that can provide them with accommodation.

Despite the lack of adequate record keeping procedures on divorce in Botswana, there is general consensus among professionals working with families as well as researchers that the number of people who divorce is increasing in the country. The increase in the number of people who divorce in Botswana has also been noted by Murray (1981: 112) who asserted that studies of small communities in Botswana and Lesotho “show that there is high rates of individual mobility, conjugal instability, illegitimacy, desertion and the break-up of families”.

Discussions by the author with several lawyers, social workers and district commissioners as sources who provide this ‘missing’ information about divorce cases in Botswana have revealed that not only is the number of people who are divorcing increasing, but the number of children who witness parental conflicts and violence associated with divorce is increasing as well. In addition, most children experience a decline in the standard of living following parental divorce, partly because of the leniency of the divorce system in ordering non-custodial parents (mostly fathers) to pay adequate levels of child support and poor enforcement of child support payments ( Maundeni, 2000a).

Children’s experiences of parental divorce are not known in Botswana, because little research if not any has been conducted on the issue. One reason why the situation is so may be that the cultural norm / assumption that children should be seen but not heard prevails in Botswana as it does in other African countries (cf. Banda, 1994). Adults (both the children’s parents and adults in general) may not be fully aware of children’s feelings, needs and experiences. The present study seeks to give children a



voice and to let their concerns and experiences be known.

***Family-related changes that have taken place in Botswana and some parts of Africa and how they can affect the lives of children of divorced parents***

A discussion of changes that have taken place in family life in Botswana is crucial in order to understand children's experiences of divorce, how divorce can affect children as well as the role that network members can play in children's adjustment. In traditional African communities (prior to industrialisation and urbanisation), societies were based on a subsistence economy, characterised by self-sufficient joint family organisation. Several family members who were related to one another by blood, marriage or adoption lived together in the same compound or in the same part of the village. The needs of family members (e.g. food, shelter, clothing and emotional support) were provided for by the extended family as a whole (Himonga, 1985). In fact, all household members were obliged to support and assist each other in accordance with the roles expected from each family member (Schapera, 1984). People complied with kinship obligations to a great extent because they feared social rather than legal sanctions. African scholars such as Bilge and Kaufman, 1983; Himonga, 1985, contend that when situations such as divorce occurred, divorced women and their children were absorbed into their kinship group or self sufficient joint family organisation and taken care of by their kinsmen in the same way as before marriage. Kin members ensured that their needs were met. According to Bilge and Kaufman, the divorce rate among communities such as the Hadza in Eastern Africa was higher than in America, however children's life experiences were not affected as a result of divorce because the social structure of the Hadza people was such that marital dissolution resulted in minimal disruption of the family's material resources and social support. This made the need for the women and their children to seek support for themselves from their husbands or seek access to family property after divorce less important if not unnecessary (Himonga, 1985). Himonga notes however that:

“The above system of support and protection for women and children, being characteristic of a single traditional society, no longer exists under modern conditions”. (p. 256).

The traditional system has been transformed by changes such as the money economy, Christianity and colonialism, which brought with them different patterns of life and values. A major change was the disintegration of the system of residence, where members of the same family group do not always live close together in the same household, ward or village. Some family members now work outside their own villages or even outside the country and are beyond the reach of senior family members who may want to enforce obligations of support (Molokomme, 1987c). Furthermore, the high cost of living in towns and limited accommodation facilities may restrict the extent to which people can help others. In his study of urbanisation and kinship in Zambia, Epstein noted how kinsmen complained about the expenses and difficulties of maintaining large groups of kin in urban situations. Himonga (1985) presents several court cases that took place in Zimbabwe to illustrate the changes in the responsibility of kin towards divorced kinswomen and their children.

The kinship system is no longer in a position to provide adequate support to its members, including those displaced as a result of divorce (Himonga, 1985). Himonga cited Ndulo (1984: 22) who rightly pointed out that:

“The joint family is in a state of decline and Africans are now enmeshed in an exchange economy. Development and industrialisation have caused an unreasonable breakdown in the traditional African social order. The society is now highly individualistic, competitive and acquisitive”.

More specific information on changes that took place as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation in Botswana were noted by Kooijman (1978) who studied the social and economic structure of the Bokaa<sup>4</sup> community. Kooijman found that kinship co-operation has largely disappeared and people have become individualistic. In other words, people are less interested in helping members of the extended family, but individuals tend to ‘make their own arrangements with the aim of realising the greatest benefit to themselves’ (pii). Kooijman relied on a wide range of methods (for example, historical records, life histories and oral tradition to analyse the major historical processes which have taken place since 1892, the date the village was founded, and she used participant observation, questionnaires, interviews, case

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<sup>4</sup> Bokaa is a village in Botswana. It is located approximately 45 kilometers from the capital city.



studies, genealogies and the consultation of relevant literature to study the contemporary social and economic structure of Bokaa). Therefore her findings reflect accurately the situation of the Bokaa community. It should be noted that Bokaa is a relatively rural community, so the implication may be that the spirit of co-operation among kin may be even weaker among people who live in urban areas. It has been assumed that people who live in rural areas are more likely to have a strong spirit of solidarity among relatives partly because they are not influenced by western values of individualism and competition as much as those who live in towns. Kooijman's findings suggest this is not the case near Gaborone (the capital city), but further away the spirit of kinship may still be strong. This may be particularly so because people living in villages, which are far from Gaborone, may not have been influenced by western modern values of individualism and competition.

Taking the above evidence on the declining role of kin in supporting family members in times of need, it is possible that divorced women and their children (especially those who live in urban areas of Botswana) are likely to lack adequate support from kin members during and after the period of separation and divorce. It should be noted that kin members are not the only social network members<sup>5</sup> for children involved in divorce. Other network members include professionals, friends and neighbours. There is however very little that has been written about the role played by other networks of divorced women and children besides kin. This is not surprising because in traditional societies, formal agencies and professionals were not well established if not non-existent. This study therefore seeks to explore among other things, the role of all social network members in children's perceived adjustment to divorce, not only that of kin.

One other change that has taken place that may influence children's experiences of divorce is the change in migration patterns. Starting from the early 1970s, the number of Botswana men who migrated to South African mines declined partly because Botswana began operating its own mines. Since then, the number of Botswana men working in South African mines decreased to a great extent. This might imply that more married men now than prior to the 1970s might be staying in Botswana and having more contact with their families, and therefore parental separation may mean

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<sup>5</sup> Social network members in the context of this thesis refers to people outside children's nuclear families that children have contact / relationships with.

a lot to children. It should be noted however that not all married couples live in the same places. Some are separated from each other because of employment demands. While some parents who do not stay with their children due to employment demands do maintain frequent contact with them, some may not. Furthermore, children's experiences of divorce can be influenced by their relationships with parents they were not staying with prior to the marital rupture.

In addition to changes from extended to nuclear families, as well as changes in migration patterns of men discussed in the previous paragraphs, other family related changes that took place as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation and the introduction of Christianity and the money economy are:

- 1) the decline of polygamy ( Simon, 1968; Schapera, 1970; Klingshirn, 1971; Brown, 1978). Schapera provided the following figures to substantiate his argument of the decline in polygamy in one district in Botswana: 1850-43%: 1880-30%: 1932-4%. In Brown's 1978 sample, there were no polygamous marriages.
- 2) arranged marriages are also uncommon in most parts of Africa ( Simon, 1968; Mair, 1969; Klingshirn, 1971).
- 3) the desire for many children has declined as children are now seen as liabilities, especially in towns, not the assets they were prior to urbanisation and industrialisation, when they worked on farms ( Simon, 1968; Klingshirn, 1971).
- 4) an increase in the number of people living in urban areas.

### ***Marriage and divorce in Botswana***

The previous section discussed how the increase in divorce in Botswana and the changes that have taken place as a result of urbanisation and industrialisation necessitated a study of children's experiences of divorce. Now I will briefly discuss marriage and divorce procedures and laws. In Botswana, two types of laws exist for people who want to marry and / or divorce. These are the customary law <sup>6</sup> and the common law.<sup>7</sup> A customary marriage is a contract between families as opposed to two individuals (Dow and Kidd, 1994). Customary law marriages in most tribes of

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<sup>6</sup> Customary law refers to 'Traditional law that obtained before the Tswana tribes came into contact with European missionaries, traders, colonialists and other foreigners' (Molokomme, 1987c:129).

Customary law is largely unwritten and is based on beliefs and customs of particular tribes.

<sup>7</sup> Common laws are laws received in Botswana during the period when the country was under British

Botswana are characterised by two essential requirements. First, the families of the prospective spouses should reach an agreement and second, there should be a transfer of bride wealth by the groom's family to that of the bride. The second requirement however does not exist in all tribal groups. Some tribes such as the Bangwato no longer practice it.

Scholars such as Molokomme (1990) have noted that the customary law of marriage has serious consequences for women and children. Molokomme for example, contends that customary marriage is potentially polygamous in nature; it requires the payment of bride price that confers more control of men over their wives. For example, a man who has paid bride price, is allowed to chastise his wife more freely than one who has not. Lastly, this kind of marriage results quite often in the husband controlling valuable property (e.g. cattle and land). When divorce takes place, husbands generally end up with most of the valuable property thus putting women and their children at a disadvantage.

Grounds for divorce under customary law vary for men and women. For example, men may file for divorce under the following grounds: infidelity, barrenness, repeated adultery, refusal to perform household chores and other traditionally viewed forms of insubordination on the part of women, while the wife cannot divorce her husband on the grounds of infidelity or cruelty unless his behaviour is excessive (Schapera, 1970). Divorce is therefore more difficult for women to obtain under customary law (Molokomme, 1990) and wives are generally required to persevere in order to preserve their marriages. This has serious implications for the emotional, physical and economic wellbeing of both women and their children. Some women may stay in abusive and violent relationships just because they cannot get divorce under customary law as easily as their husbands.

Under the common law, some of the essential conditions which people marrying should meet include: the publication of banns three weeks before the intended marriage, or a special license must be obtained; the marriage must be solemnised by a marriage officer or minister of religion, both of whom must be appointed by the Minister; and lastly, only people who are not insane and boys above the age of 16 and girls above the age of 14 can marry under the common law (Molokomme, 1990).



Minors below these ages may only marry with the consent of their parents.

According to the common law, the sole ground on which an action for divorce may be based is that the marriage has broken down irretrievably. Four factors which the plaintiff may invoke to prove such a breakdown are provided under section 15 of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1974 (Chapter 29:07). These are: the adultery of the defendant which results in the plaintiff finding joint life intolerable; the behaviour of the defendant which is such that the plaintiff cannot reasonably be expected to live with the defendant; desertion by the defendant for at least two years immediately preceding the action; and that the parties have lived apart for two years before the action and the defendant consents to the decree being granted.

### ***Summary of chapter***

This chapter provided background information which helps readers to contextualise findings of this study. It has highlighted among other things that gender inequalities that prevail in legislation as well as in the economic and educational sectors can shape children's experiences of divorce. It has also shown that the changes that took place as a result of urbanisation and industrialisation may lead divorced women and their children to lack support from extended family members. The review of the Botswana context indicated that although divorce can have some similar consequences for children in Botswana as in developed countries, the different socio-economic environment will also result in different implications for children. In the rest of this thesis, I will highlight the similarities and differences.

### ***Structure of the study***

This study contains a total of ten chapters and is organised as follows:

Chapter one is this introductory chapter, which mainly describes the background and justification for the study. Chapter two presents a detailed discussion of the theoretical frameworks that guided this study, while in chapter three, I review existing literature on children's experiences of divorce. In chapter four, I discuss the research design and methodology of the study. Chapter five explores children's experiences before separation. Chapters six up to nine focus on perceptions of

children's post-divorce experiences, their effects on children as well as how they coped. The last chapter summarises the study findings and outlines their implications for theory, research, policy, and practice.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theoretical Perspectives

The study explores children's experiences of parental separation and divorce processes in Botswana. It draws on two main overlapping theoretical perspectives: These are: the social constructionist approach and the sociology of childhood approach. The concept of resilience as well as some concepts of feminist, social network and family stress theories guided the choice of certain specific topics explored with families as well as the analysis of the findings of the study. The chapter discusses each of these in turn.

#### *The Social Constructivist Approach*

Social constructivists believe that there is no objective reality for people, but "that what is real is a construction in the minds of individuals" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 83). According to them, knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind (Schwandt, 1998: 236). This is contrary to objectivists' belief that ".....the world is composed of facts and the goal of knowledge is to provide a literal account of what the world is like" (Schwandt, 1994:125). Constructivists therefore contend that in order for researchers to understand the complex world of lived experiences, they should focus on the point of view of those who live it. Proponents of the social constructivist paradigm believe that the world of lived reality and the meanings of events and situations that researchers investigate are constructed by social actors in particular places and at particular times. The constructions take place through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language and action. They argue that to understand this world of meaning, one must interpret it (Schwardt, 1994).

The social constructivist approach also assumes that realities are: multiple / pluralistic, often conflicting, plastic, constructed, meaningful and can be studied holistically (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Realities are pluralistic in the sense that they are expressible in a variety of symbols and language systems; plastic in the sense that they are stretched and shaped to fit purposeful acts of intentional human agents (Schwandt, 1994:125); constructions in the sense that what is real is a construction in the minds of individuals, in other words, what we take to be objective knowledge



and truth is the result of perspective (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; James and Prout, 1997).

According to Lincoln and Guba (p.71) constructions are attempts to make sense of or to interpret experience, and most are self-sustaining and self-renewing. These authors contend that people create concepts, models and schemes to make sense of experience and continually test and modify the constructions as they are exposed to new experiences. This means that social actors have different perspectives about their experiences. Relating the above assumption of social construction theory to the present study, it follows that each child and each custodial mother's perception may be different, and that their perceptions may keep changing as they are exposed to new experiences. For instance, a child may have negative attitudes towards the divorce during the time immediately following parental physical separation, but as time goes on and when the child is exposed to new experiences (for example when she / he lives with a step parent who is loving to him / her and who caters for his / her material, financial and emotional needs), the child may develop positive attitudes towards the divorce.

The constructivist approach has been used in studies of family life such as the one conducted by Peled (1998) who focused on pre-adolescent children's experiences of living with violence in America, as well as that conducted by Backett (1982) in Scotland. Backett's study focused mainly on how spouses defined their social worlds and negotiated these definitions with other family members in order to achieve a subjectively satisfactory construction of being a parent. According to Backett, each family member had his / her own constructions of reality (individual level constructions) which were different from those of other members and the family members engaged in a continuous process of negotiation in order to achieve some sense of acting in the same reality (family level constructions).

It should be noted at this point that there are three levels of constructions. These are: individual level; the family level and the societal level. Individual level constructions refer to constructions of reality as held by each individual. They are made up of individuals' perceptions of reality (Backett, 1982). Other scholars (e.g. Lincoln and Guba, 1985) contend that individual level constructions are made up of individuals' interpretation of the way things are and what has happened to them. Family level

constructions refer to the constructions of reality about family life that are held within each family (Backett, 1982). Societal level constructions refer to constructions of reality that everybody takes for granted or holds. Conceptions of childhood, for example, are social constructions held at societal level.

The societal construction of childhood has been described by Mayall (1994: 2) who asserts that “As developing people and as socialization objects, children have been conceptualised as lesser than adults, in that they are progressing towards the goal of mature adulthood; they are also the legitimate objects of adult attention, rather than persons in their own right”. Proponents of the social constructivist approach have however pointed out that children are active and creative in promoting their own knowledge, development and social positioning.

### Methodological implications of the social construction paradigm for studying children and divorce

The main implication of the paradigm for this study is its emphasis on paying attention to the point of view of people who have experienced a certain phenomenon. The major emphasis of this study is on how children perceived and constructed their experiences of divorce. This premise is the thrust of the current study and it prompted a study of this nature. Relying on adults' accounts to study children's experiences may not produce useful results as children's constructions of their own experiences are likely to differ from those of adults. The main focus of this study is on how children make sense of their experiences. Eliciting information from children themselves about their experiences of divorce will address a gap which has been neglected by previous researchers on children in Botswana.

Other methodological implications of the social constructionist approach for this study are that researchers:

- a) who use the social constructivist paradigm select qualitative methods over quantitative (although not exclusively) because they are more adaptable to dealing with multiple (and less aggregatable) realities and because they are more sensitive to and adaptable to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns that may be encountered ;

- b) carry out research in subjects' natural settings, because realities are wholes that cannot be understood in isolation from their context; use themselves as well as other humans as the primary data-gathering instruments (as opposed to paper-and-pencil); and
- c) and are likely to use purposive sampling rather than representative sampling because purposive sampling increases the scope or range of data exposed (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 39 / 40).

Although purposive sampling relies on smaller samples, the samples are usually diverse and researchers are able to collect a wide range of information. For other implications of the social constructivist paradigm for doing research, see Lincoln and Guba (1985: 40 /41). My study used the above guidelines of the constructivist approach to a great extent in that it is qualitative in nature; face to face interviews were used to collect data rather than questionnaires; the interviews were conducted in the homes (a natural setting) of the respondents (except if the respondents objected); and purposive sampling was used to locate respondents.

### ***The Sociology of Childhood Paradigm***

The sociology of childhood paradigm was strongly influenced by some concepts of the social constructionist approach. In fact the sociology of childhood paradigm in some ways is an applied branch of social construction theory. As such, the two perspectives share some concepts in common. This will be shown in detail at the end of the chapter when I discuss the relationship between all the theoretical perspectives which have been used in this study.

The sociology of childhood emerged partly as a result of dissatisfaction among some sociologists about the way in which children were portrayed in most of the social science literature. According to Qvortrup (1991), social science research had largely treated children as 'objects of study' to produce correlational results and inform conceptual frameworks, rather than focusing on the subjective meanings of children's viewpoints. The former approach has also been criticised on the basis that the "types of topic chosen and methods used reflect adults' rather than children's concerns....." (Laybourn et al, 1996: 13). As a result of dissatisfaction such as the



above, Prout and James (1990) proposed the 'new paradigm'. Below are some of the paradigm's key features as listed by the above authors (p 8-9).

- i) Childhood is socially constructed. What it is like to be a child is shaped by the cultural and structural contexts in which children live.
- ii) Children's social relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right and not just in respect to their social construction by adults.
- iii) Children are not passive subjects of socialisation, but actively contribute to their own social worlds, as well as the lives of those around them.
- iv) Childhood is not a single and universal phenomenon, but there is a variety of childhoods. Variables such as gender, class or ethnicity affect how children experience their childhood in various societies.
- v) Methods that allow children a more direct voice and participation in the production of data such as ethnography are useful for the study of childhood.
- vi) Proclaiming a new paradigm of childhood sociology also implies engaging in and responding to the process of reconstructing childhood in society.

Since James and Prout's work cited above, various scholars have written about the sociology of childhood paradigm. For example, Qvortrup and colleagues (1994) contend that children are marginalised in society, and this results in their access to attention, places and resources being restricted. Adults quite often justify children's marginalisation on the basis that they are protecting them, however protection can also have paternalist effects (James and Prout, 1997). Proponents of the sociology of childhood paradigm also contend that children should be seen as active agents in society as a whole, not simply as representing products of adult society.

#### Methodological implications of the sociology of childhood for this study

Children in the present study, as proponents of the sociology of childhood advocate, were considered as active and capable individuals who, like adults could make sense of their experiences. Therefore, interviews were conducted with them in their own

right. Although mothers were interviewed, the main emphasis was on the children's accounts. It was recognised before the collection of data that children's accounts might differ from those of adults. In addition, children's competencies and views were respected. For example, children were given the choice to refuse participation or even withdraw during the course of the interview if they felt uncomfortable with the issues discussed. I did not take for granted that because mothers had allowed children to participate, this meant that children were willing to do so. They were also asked to choose a place where they wanted the interviews to be conducted, as well as what information they wanted to disclose. All the above options that were given to children served to give children the message that they, just like adults, were viewed as capable of identifying their preferences. The options also gave them a certain level of control and as such also served to empower them.

The sociology of childhood acknowledges that each society has its own expectations about adult-child relations, children's behaviour, actions and appearance. Interviewing children and mothers provided us with an opportunity to explore these expectations and images. Both images that children hold of parents as well as those which parents hold of children were explored in relation to how they influenced children's experiences of divorce.

Because the sociology of childhood paradigm treats children as active and competent members of society whose relations with people around them can be reciprocal, not one-sided, in this study I explored the ways through which children's relations with both their family and social network members were reciprocal. In addition, I explored how children in general influenced their experiences of divorce. For example, domestic violence literature points out that some children who witness parental violence intervene to try to stop it. This was one issue that was looked into, to explore whether children were active agents in the process of parental divorce.

### ***Feminist Perspective***

Feminist theory was used in this study because of its applicability to marital separation. Gender relations are central to family life, so feminist theory is important to an understanding of family issues such as separation. There are various types of feminist perspectives, for example, radical, socialist and liberal. However they are all

concerned about finding equality between men and women in all areas of society, without women being seen as the weaker sex. Feminists such as Thorne (1992) assert that gender plays a significant role in the organisation of both family and the state. They contend that men dominate women in both the private and the public arenas. In the family, the traditional division of responsibilities between spouses in most societies, with the husband as provider and wife in the domestic roles results in women's economic dependence on men. Women also carry far greater responsibility for domestic duties and children, whether or not they work outside the home. Housework is not only unpaid, but also often burdensome and devalued. Feminists argue that 'constraints built into society limits women in their efforts to be successful providers for their families' (Kamaruddin, 1995: 39).

Similarly, in the public sector, according to feminist theorists, women in general remain in a secondary position. This is evidenced, for example, by the high numbers of women in many societies who work in low paying jobs compared to men. Feminists argue that gender inequalities in the family and those that prevail in the public sector are related. For instance, Reskin and Roos (1990) contend that women's continuing economic, legal and political subordination outside the households affects their ability to claim full equality within, while Kamaruddin (1995) contends that women's weak position in the labour market is a consequence of their domestic role. This in turn reinforces their subordination in the home. Feminists argue that men dominate high status jobs (Archer and Lloyd, 1982) such as those in policy and law making arenas. They control the health, legal, welfare, educational, economic, judicial, religious, and reproductive policies. In addition, they claim the way these systems function is primarily determined by patriarchal beliefs and values (also see Waldby et al, 1989: 98). Men make laws and policies that affect women and children. Therefore the extent to which such policies adequately meet women and children's needs is questionable.

Feminists arguments discussed above have important implications for children's experiences of separation since women in many countries are given custody of children. These implications can be direct or indirect. According to feminist scholars, women's performance of the bulk of household work as well as their low economic resources during the period when they are married are some of the major factors that account for their worse off economic circumstances following divorce. This trend has



been noted by among others Okin (1989) as cited by Kamaruddin (1995: 39) who asserted that “although the economically subordinate situation of women frequently remains concealed during marriage, it becomes instantly obvious on marriage breakdown...”. Not only do women face economic distress following divorce, some face social and psychological distress as a result of the economic distress. The distress affects their children as well. It is clear therefore that the prospects of divorcing women, especially if they are custodial parents, are in many ways much bleaker than the prospects of divorcing men. This is because of the legacy of their pre-separation economic circumstances.

Another indirect implication is that because men dominate policy making jobs, policies they make to meet children and women’s needs such as laws governing divorce, division of property, child custody, domestic violence and child support may discriminate against women and children. Feminists such as Sapiro (1990) therefore contend that families and households in patriarchal societies are not only affected by the gender inequalities that are prevalent in families, but are also affected by those that prevail at the state level. This study will emphasise this argument with illustrations from Botswana.

Male domination over women also has indirect implications for children through violence on women. Violence on mothers affects children’s emotions as well as their mothers’ parenting skills (cf. Peled, 1998; Levendosky et al, 2000)

Not only does male domination have indirect implications for the lives of children of divorced parents in maternal custody, it also has direct implications. One of the direct implications is when children themselves are victims of paternal violence. Both child abuse and women abuse are some ways by which men express and / or increase their dominance over family members. According to feminist scholars (cf. Bowker et al, 1990: 166 ) “violent and previolent men have high needs to dominate their wives and children. They achieve and maintain the level of dominance they consider appropriate by a variety of oppressive strategies, including wife beating, child abuse, marital rape, psychological abuse, punitive economic deprivation, and coerced social isolation”. Feminists also contend that the girl child is likely to become the second victim of the battering husband (cf. Dobash and Dobash, 1977, Bowker et al, 1990).

The Feminist perspective has several methodological implications for research. One of them which was used in this study was that it favours qualitative methods. Feminists such as Oakley (1994) contend that both women and children are capable of contributing meaningful research data, and that in order for researchers to adequately address children and women's issues, they should focus on their view points.

### ***Social Network Theory***

Social network theory has been largely used in anthropology and sociology. Recently, some of its concepts have been applied to psychiatry, psychology and social work (Lewis and Feiring, 1979; Turkat, 1980). According to Mitchell (1969:1), social network theory was developed largely for two reasons: 1) as a result of growing dissatisfaction with structural-functional analyses and the search for alternative ways of interpreting social action; 2) so that non-quantitative mathematical ways of stating the implications entailed in a set of relationships among a number of people could be developed. It has largely been used in quantitative studies, as such, in this study, I used concepts which are applicable to a qualitative study of this nature.

Over the past two decades, there has been an increased interest in conceptualising human behaviour in the context of large family and social systems and the social network model has begun to emerge as a useful theoretical model for the analysis and description of complex social systems and interactions (Tolsdorf, 1976). The pioneer of network theory is Bott (1957) in her study of conjugal roles in London families. Her work showed how morphological characteristics of networks could be related to marital role segregation, and since then, the importance of social networks as a mediating factor in human behaviour has been studied with respect to mental health issues such as personal crisis (Boswell, 1969); help-seeking behaviour (McKinlay, 1973); hospital and psychiatric admissions (Hammer, 1963; Tolsdorf, 1976) and divorce ( Colletta, 1979; Wilcox, 1981).

Mitchell (1969: 2) defines a social network as "a specific set of linkages among a defined set of persons, with the property that the characteristics of these linkages as a whole may be used to interpret the social behaviour of the persons involved". More simply, Bott (1957:320) defines a network as "all or some of the social units

(individuals or groups) with whom a particular individual or group is in contact". Network analysis is therefore an approach that focuses on properties of individual and group relationships to assess an individual's social environment (Fischer, 1977).

The social network literature proposes many dimensions and concepts and usually researchers employ variables that suit the research problems they are investigating (Tolsdorf, 1980). Mitchell and Trickett (1980:31) listed the following as some of the major dimensions or characteristics along which networks are described:

### 1. Structural characteristics of networks.

These include:

- a) size or range, i.e. the number of people with whom a focal person has contact; b) network density, which refers to the extent to which members of an individual's social network contact each other independently of the focal person (Mitchell, 1969); c) degree of connection which refers to the average number of relationships that each member has with other members of the network.

### 2. Characteristics of component linkages.

These include:

- a) intensity, which refers to the strength of the tie, as measured in terms of the number of reciprocal functions or services which characterise the tie; b) durability, referring to the degree of stability of the individual's links with his/her network members. c) multi dimensionality or multiplexity, referring to the number of functions served by a relationship; d) directness and reciprocity, referring to the degree to which affective and instrumental aid is both given and received by the focal person; e) homogeneity, which refers to the extent to which network members share common social attributes (e.g. religious affiliation, socio-economic status, etc); f) frequency with which the focal person makes contact with members of his / her network; and g) dispersion.



### 3. Normative context of the relationship.

This dimension refers to a focal person's network members. These could be: primary kin, secondary kin or extended family, friends, neighbors and work acquaintances.

Marsella and Snyder (1981) adds the dimension of function to the above list of characteristics of social networks. This dimension describes the specific functions served by network members. For example, the provision of goods and services; cash; acting as channels of information; advice; reinforcement; intimacy; social integration; establishing shared attitudes and patterns of behaviour; enhancing self-esteem and offering opportunities for giving as well as receiving. These can be grouped together, for example: 1) practical / task centred help; 2) emotional support; 3) cognitive and attitudinal guidance; and 4) social benefits.

According to proponents of social network theory, individuals and families interact with various social networks, some of which are supportive, others are not, while still others can be sources of stress. However, most literature on social networks has focused on the supportive functions of networks only, rather than on both supportive and non-supportive functions. A focus on both supportive and non-supportive functions is crucial as it gives a balanced perspective of the role of social networks. It must be remembered that while networks can provide support, they can also provide wider social functions ranging from the socialisation of children to the generation of delinquency (Hill, 1992).

Mitchell and Trickett (1980) have found that the ideas of network analysis are of great relevance and assistance in the field of community mental health. From their review of the literature on social networks, Mitchell and Trickett, concluded that social network analysis has implications both for an understanding of community life and for the design of intervention programmes. They assert that "when viewed as a way of thinking about people and programmes, social network analysis can inform a number of the assessment, program development, and program evaluation functions of community mental health centres"(p. 41). They however acknowledge that various social forces and value choices in the immediate situation still mediates / influences the translation of network concepts into intervention activities.

## Methodological implications of social network theory for the present study

Social network theory can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative studies, therefore some of its concepts are less readily applicable to qualitative studies like the present one. Those which were particularly valuable in this study are: function; reciprocity; dispersion; accessibility, frequency; durability; and normative context of the relationship.

The present study adopts the view that concepts about social networks form a useful tool in examining both the functional and dysfunctional influences of significant others in individual adaptation. Mitchell and Trickett (1980) also adopted this view in their overview of literature on social networks. This study therefore not only explored supportive functions of networks, but also non-supportive ones. For example, questions such as members who caused stress to children, what they did or did not do were covered and how their actions and behaviour affected children's perceived adjustment.

In addition to the concept of function, the other concept that was used in this study is that of durability. Durability refers to the degree of stability of the individual's links with his / her network members (Mitchell and Trickett, 1980). Divorce is a family transition that can create instability in the composition and functions of some children's social network members. The stability of an individual's network in the areas of structure, interaction and function is important to his / her adjustment to stressful situations (Froland and colleagues, 1979:83). In the present study, as in Froland and colleagues' study, stability was examined by asking mothers and children about moves (changes in neighbourhoods) and loss of contact or feelings of loss of support in order to understand how stability or instability of a child's network affected children's adjustment.

The concept of frequency was used to explore, for example, how often children had contact with their network members. Dispersion was used to examine perceptions of how close or far away children lived from their significant others, while and accessibility examined the ease with which children made contact with their network members.

## ***Family Stress theory***

Family stress theory, particularly, the ABCX and the double ABCX models of family stress have been developed from analysis of a wide range of stressful events and circumstances (McCubbin and Patterson, 1983a, b; Walker, 1985; Krahn, 1993). They have also been largely used in quantitative studies. Family stress theorists propose that the definition of the situation interacts with the stressor event and the family member's resources to produce a crisis situation (McCubbin et al, 1980; Peterson, 1984). Because this study is qualitative in nature, I have used concepts which seemed applicable to it. These are stress, coping, supports / resources, definition of the situation and adjustment / adaptation. When applied to children's experiences of divorce, family stress theory emphasises that whether children perceive the various divorce related experiences as stressful, as well as how they cope with them / adjust largely, depends on their definitions and perceptions of their experiences, as well as personal, family and social network resources.

### **Methodological implications of family stress theory for the present study**

Family stress theory depicts the complexities involved in the process of how divorce affects children. It emphasises how the same or similar events can be defined very differently by people affected. In the present study, each child's definitions / perceptions of the various divorce related experiences were solicited. Family stress theory's concepts of stress, coping and support were also used to guide the questions in the interview schedule.

## ***The Concept of Resilience***

Resilience is a theoretical concept that loosely ties together a growing body of knowledge on children's positive coping under adverse circumstances (e.g. Garmezy, 1991). A number of scholars (cf. Garbarino et al, 1992; Peled, 1998) contend that not all children exposed to powerful stressors sustain developmental damage. Some are able to thrive in the face of adversity. Yet much of the research on children and divorce had previously focused on their vulnerabilities and problems. According to Rutter (1985), the person who is resilient has a) a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence; b) a sense of self-efficacy (a belief in their capacity to make a difference,



and c) a repertoire of social problem solving approaches. Children were asked several questions to explore their perceptions of how they coped with divorce and related stressors, as well as how they felt about themselves in relation to the various circumstances they went through. These questions enabled children to identify processes that enhanced their self-esteem as well as their overall adjustment to divorce such as positive relationships with peers and performing well at school.

### ***Relationship between the theoretical perspectives used in this study***

The theoretical approaches used in this study complement each other, but they overlap in some respects. For example:

- 1) The sociology of childhood paradigm derives many of its principles from the social construction approach. For instance, the two approaches challenge the dominant conceptual views which regard children as passive incompetent beings. They instead acknowledge that children are active and able to promote their own knowledge and development.
- 2) The social construction and sociology of childhood perspectives as well as the feminist theory emphasise the importance of paying attention to accounts of people who go through a particular experience (in this case children). The three perspectives view children as the best informants to be asked about their experiences.
- 3) Both the sociology of childhood perspective and the feminist theory acknowledge children's lack of power.
- 4) Family stress theory shares with the social construction approach the concept of people's definitions of situations. How people perceive situations is the main thrust of the social constructionist approach.
- 5) The sociology of childhood paradigm shares with family stress theory the concept of 'personal resources'. The sociology of childhood paradigm however calls these 'competencies'. Children's personal resources or competencies can be in the form of high self-esteem, good health, intelligence, ability to seek social support, etc. The concept of reciprocity in social network theory is also closely related to those of personal resources and competencies. Some children, for example had

reciprocal relations with social network members by helping with household chores.

### ***Summary of chapter***

This chapter has outlined the theoretical framework of the present study. Drawing on the various approaches and concepts outlined in the chapter, my analysis of children's experiences of divorce was guided by the following theoretical observations: First, children are active agents who are capable of making sense of their experiences. Second, they have competencies and their relationships with family and social network members can be reciprocal. Third, their perceptions and definitions of divorce and its related changes as well as the resources they have are likely to influence how they cope / adjust to the divorce process. Fourth, both children and women have a lower status relative to men in society, and they lack resources and power. They are both vulnerable to domestic violence and economic deprivation as a result of their weak position. Children's experiences of divorce are therefore likely to be affected by their subordinate position in society. Lastly, images that parents and children hold of each other affect children's experiences as well as how they cope. The next chapter reviews existing literature on children and divorce.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Literature Review: Separation, Divorce and Children**

In this chapter, I will show that most research on children and divorce has been conducted in developed countries. As a result little is known about children's experiences of divorce in Botswana - a developing country. I discuss difficulties associated with comparing literature from Botswana with that from other countries and examine critically what the available literature has to tell us about the process of divorce and separation in that country.

Botswana literature is compared with that from other countries for several reasons. First, no study has been done in Botswana that specifically focuses on children's experiences of divorce. However some studies have been conducted on divorce-related issues such as child custody and child support. Second, comparisons with literature from other countries are important because they allow us to derive questions and theories that might be applied to Botswana. Lastly, the comparisons enable us to test the applicability of western-based theories in an African context. Although it is important to adopt a comparative approach to the literature, we should be wary of transferring material from one country to another because countries differ in their socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. In other words, the comparative approach has limitations. These will be apparent in the ensuing review.

#### ***A comparison of Botswana literature with that from other countries***

A majority of studies on children's experiences of divorce have been done in developed countries and are correlational and quantitative. Findings from correlational studies only tell us about statistical associations and outcomes, not the actual processes. This study attempts to redress the balance by looking at the processes in a qualitative way and by its focus on children in a developing country.

Most scholars on children and divorce argue that the legal divorce itself does not necessarily contribute to emotional and behavioural problems of children, but the specific hardships and demands that result from parental separation account for



children's adjustment problems. These hardships include: poor communication about divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Walczak and Burns, 1984; Owusu Bempah, 1995), conflicts and violence between parents ( Ahrons, 1983; Johnston et al, 1989; Emery, 1999), lower family income that sometimes leads to changes of neighbourhoods and loss of important support networks (Amato and Keith, 1991; Duncan, 1994), negative changes in relationships with parents (Hetherington, 1993; Emery, 1999) and step-family life. This argument is relevant to this chapter, and as such, I will review literature that follows this line of thinking.

### Literature that focused on custody

Maternal custody is the common arrangement in Botswana (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1989). Botswana is not the only country where maternal custody is common, it is also popular in countries such as Britain (cf. Eekelaar and Clive, 1977) and North America (cf. Rowe, 1991). Maternal, rather than paternal custody is popular in Botswana where young children are involved or where former husbands were violent (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1989; Maundeni, 2000a). Taking into account research findings (for example, Molokomme, 1990) that show that most women who file divorce cases in Botswana have experienced violence, it is not surprising that a majority of women get custody of children. Besides the reasons mentioned above that account for the prevalence of maternal custody in Botswana, custody of minor children is awarded to mothers because it is assumed that a mother's affection is better adapted to the care of a young child than a father. This belief is justified on psychological rather than material grounds (Mpelega et al, 1996). Guardianship of children in Botswana, however, is usually retained by their fathers (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1989: 209). The words custody and guardianship are often confused, so it is important to clarify the difference between them. A custodial parent is one who is entrusted to nurture and bring up the minor child. She / he is responsible for the daily life of the child, by providing shelter, nourishment and the training of the child (Mpelega et al, 1996). The guardian parent on the other hand 'continues to function as the child's legal representative and the administrator of his property' (Ibid: 1).

It is striking that the above definition of the guardian parent does not place any obligation on him to support the child financially, but only attests to the custodial parent's responsibility for the daily needs of the child. Here we see yet another

example of gender discrimination. It is disturbing that although men in Botswana generally have more resources than women, they are only given the guardianship role, which does not oblige them to support their off-spring materially, but only to oversee their legal rights and administer their property.

Although maternal custody is the popular arrangement in Botswana, studies from neighbouring countries of Zimbabwe and South-Africa show that paternal custody is the common arrangement. In a study which sought, among other things, to find out how custody allocations were determined in divorce cases, Burman and Fuchs (1986) found that it was common for men to be granted custody of children. Their study revealed that custody allocations in South Africa depend on what arrangements are made for children's care after divorce, incomes available and family patterns. According to Burman and Fuchs, in South Africa, it is common for fathers to apply for child custody unlike in the U.K and U.S. For example, almost half of fathers in their sample obtained custody of their children. These authors associated the prevalence of fathers obtaining custody with the following factors: a) Child care is relatively cheap in South Africa, as most white people hire domestic workers at low wages. b) Islamic laws that permit fathers of Asian origin to retain custody of children after divorce. c) Customary law considerations as well as the results of apartheid legislation (for Africans).

According to Burman and Fuchs, some mothers, on the other hand, do not contest for custody because of: a) Views that adultery would prevent a mother from obtaining custody. b) Many poor women cannot afford to support their children on their own partly because the welfare system provides 'very little assistance for divorced African mothers, and none where the mother is able-bodied, but unemployed' (p 131) and low maintenance payments from husbands, where awarded. Lastly, African women's desire to preserve their children's rights to urban residence, taking into account the widespread malnutrition, high unemployment and high child mortality in many rural areas also contributes to the low number of women applying for custody. Burman and Fuchs assert that 'Given all these considerations, it seems likely that the high number of fathers gaining custody of their children is the result both of more fathers requesting custody and more women surrendering it' (p 132).

Literature from Zimbabwe shows that paternal custody is common there too.



According to Maboreke (1987) and Banda (1994), cultural beliefs as well as women's inferior economic position adversely affect their ability to obtain custody of children upon divorce. Banda found that women married under Zimbabwe customary law whose husbands have paid bride-price (lobola) are denied custody of children upon divorce because by paying bride-price, husbands acquire genetic rights. The acquisition of these rights means that 'any child born of the union belong to the family of the husband' (Banda, 1994:194). Maboreke contends that customary court personnel believe that African men have a right to their children and that this right should be respected whenever possible.

She further observed that because women have lower economic status than men, they are less able to provide for their children's material needs. As a result, they either do not contest for custody of their children or lose the custody battle because their ex-spouse is in a better position to provide for the children financially. Similarly, Banda found that because most women realise that they could not provide adequately for their children, they let husbands have custody of children hoping that the children's material needs would be better met through that arrangement. She also found that economic considerations (rather than emotional considerations) were not only given high priority by women, but also by lawyers.

Research findings that maternal custody is prevalent in Botswana, but not in Zimbabwe and South Africa shows that there are variations in the practice of custody among countries. The studies reviewed above on child custody in South Africa and Zimbabwe bear out the claims of feminist theorists that women's inferior economic and social position shape custody decisions, and as such custody decisions may not be made in the best interest of the child.

#### Literature that focused on children's economic circumstances following divorce

Most of the research relevant to children of divorced parents in Botswana has focused on child support laws and practices. Griffith (1984) explored the problems that women encounter in obtaining paternal economic support for dependent children through the customary law system in Molepolole. Half of the 60 women in her study faced problems related to access, remedy and enforcement. The customary system relies heavily on family involvement in the filing of claims for child maintenance, but



some women encountered lack of support and co-operation from family members. This requirement that women should rely on the support of family members to file child support complaints shows that women are treated as minors. That has serious implications for both their economic welfare and that of their children, because women who do not have family support are likely not to file and / or receive child support payments in customary courts. Griffith also found that problems emanated from the customary court practice that denies assistance to women who have more than one child out of wedlock. Again here we see another example of laws that do not favour women. Griffith found that the customary system is concerned more about the restoration of harmony and of prior relationships than individual problems such as lack of support.

Further evidence that children who do not stay with their fathers lack financial support from them has also been provided by studies conducted by Kossoudji and Mueller, 1983, *Women and Law in Southern Africa – WILSA*, 1991; Molokomme, 1991; Alexander and colleagues, 1992; and Van-Driel, 1994. Alexander and colleagues (1992) examined maintenance laws and practices in Botswana. Like Griffith, they took a broad approach that included not only separated and divorced mothers, but also mothers who had never been married or whose male partners had deserted them. These researchers found that in both the customary and magistrates' courts over 50 % of the records reflected either no payment of child support or only part of the payment. The authors found no evidence of any enforcement action. Low rates of payment of child support were also found by Molokomme (1991), who examined the legal regulation of men's compensation for pregnancies and the maintenance of children born outside of marriage in Kanye, a larger village in Botswana. Molokomme also found that prosecution of defaulters was rare and given low priority.

All the studies about child support in Botswana reviewed above have found that most fathers who do not stay with their children do not financially support them. This leads to widespread poverty among female-headed, compared with male-headed, households in Botswana (Kossoudji and Mueller, 1983; Van-Driel, 1994).

Studies about child support from other Southern African countries, for example, Swaziland (cf. Nhlapo, 1990), and Zimbabwe (cf. Stewart et al, 1990), also show that

most men who do not stay with their children do not support them financially. In her paper on the legal situation of women in Swaziland, Nhlapo, for example, found that some men who do not pay child support justify their actions on the basis that they do not have custody of children. In other words, they tend to associate custody with maintenance. According to Nhlapo, it is common for fathers to refuse (even on pain or imprisonment) to pay periodic sums to the mother, insisting that they want their children to live with them. This is so despite the fact that the award of custody to fathers in Swaziland is not sanctioned by either the common law (which vests custody in the mother) or the customary law (which vests it in the child's grandfather). Since these laws do not give custody to fathers, and fathers feel responsible to pay for children only if they have custody, it can be deduced that most separated children do not receive paternal financial support.

In Zambia, married women under customary law are entitled to maintenance by their husbands only during the marriage, but not after the divorce (Himonga, et al, 1990). According to these authors, this creates economic hardship for them and their children. In contrast, women married according to statute are entitled to maintenance on divorce. In Zimbabwe, a parent has the duty to maintain his or her child until the child has reached the legal age of majority or until it becomes self-supporting. This applies whether the child concerned is legitimate or illegitimate (Stewart et al, 1990). The system of child maintenance in Zimbabwe however, is poorly administered leading to late, or even non-payment of maintenance dues (Maboreke, 1987; Stewart et al, 1990).

In its comprehensive report of maintenance in Southern Africa, *Women and Law in Southern Africa - WILSA*, (1991), noted that child support systems in six countries of Southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho, Zambia, Swaziland, Mozambique and Zimbabwe) have serious problems of enforcing maintenance orders. WILSA also found that poor monitoring and enforcement of maintenance orders discourage women from making claims.

Himonga's (1985) study of how property disputes in law and practice in dissolution of marriages in Zambia affected women and children also deserves to be mentioned. She found among other things that the way maintenance disputes were decided in magistrates' courts did not appear to be based on the principle of the 'welfare of the



child'. This resulted in children who are in maternal custody after divorce being denied maintenance by their fathers. She further noted that not only do divorced women and their children suffer economic hardship because of the inability of magistrates' courts to order fathers to pay child support, but also because the kinship system is no longer in a position to give adequate support to its members as it used to do prior to industrialisation.

Economic hardship following divorce is not only peculiar to children in Southern Africa. Research from the U. K. and the U. S. also attests to children's lowered economic resources after separation (cf. Wadsworth and Maclean, 1986; Eekelaar and Maclean, 1986; Weitzman, 1985; Duncan, 1994). Although children in both western and African countries experience economic hardships following their parents' separation, I argue that the hardships experienced by children in the latter countries may be less severe than those experienced by children in developing countries such as Botswana. This can be so because welfare programmes in the former countries are more generous and the criteria used to determine eligibility does not exclude able-bodied unemployed mothers.

Economic hardship impinges on children's rights by limiting their access to the basic needs of life such as education, food, shelter, health and clothing (Maundeni, 2000b). While it is recognised that poverty may have the same impact on children irrespective of whether they live in intact or divorced families, I argue that children of divorced parents are likely to be more adversely affected because the hardships are often accompanied by other sources of stress, such as moving to new and less secure neighborhoods, changes of schools, loss of supportive networks, exclusion from activities that have become too expensive for the family's budget and conflicts between parents.

Little is known about the effects of poverty or a low standard of living on children of divorced parents in Botswana. However, insights can be drawn from findings on poverty in Botswana and other African countries. According to research conducted by the Botswana Institute of Development Policy Analysis – BIDPA, 1997), poor people (who are largely found in female headed households) rely more on wood / charcoal for cooking and on paraffin gas for lightning. This has serious implications for the health of household members and for their ability to study and work during weekends because they are more likely to live in smoky environments and have



lower quality domestic lighting. The BIDPA report contends that these factors explain the high incidence of acute respiratory infections and avoidable communicable diseases among children in rural areas and contribute to the problem of poor children failing to devote sufficient time to school homework.

The impact of poverty on children's health is not only peculiar to Botswana, but has also been noted by studies in African countries such as Tanzania (UNICEF, 1985; Sender and Smith, 1990). These authors contend that malnutrition is widespread among children living in poor families in Tanzania. Studies conducted in the west have also found that lack of economic resources adversely affects children's nutrition and health (Williams, 1990).

In both Tanzania (cf. Sender and Smith, 1990) and Uganda (cf. Elliot and Morsier, 1975), research has shown that low household income adversely affects children's educational progress. According to Elliot and Morsier (1975), one of the major causes of school dropouts in Uganda is parents' inability to pay school fees. These authors contend that a financial reason was given even when no fees were charged because parents still had to pay for books, transport and food. Little is known about how poverty or a low level of family income affects children's education in Botswana. This study will therefore, among other things, explore children and mothers' perceptions of this issue.

The relationship between poverty and children's educational performance is not a phenomenon that has been found in developing countries of Africa only, it has also been found in western countries. In his Irish study of poverty, social class, education and intergenerational mobility, Whelan (1994) found that households that are exposed to the highest risks of unemployment and poverty were also the source of those school leavers who enter the labour market lacking qualifications. Hodges and colleagues (1984) in their American study reported that teachers rated children from divorced families with inadequate incomes as more depressed and anxious than their counterparts with adequate incomes.

Researchers in developed countries have further found that low income also stigmatises children and can lead them to engage in deviant acts (Voydanoff and Majka, 1988). Furthermore, children who are deprived materially tend to feel unequal

to their peers, which adversely affects their self-image (Walczack and Burns, 1984). Lastly, economic hardships associated with divorce can force children and their families to move from the family home to housing that their mothers can afford. Quite often, affordable housing is found in neighbourhoods with poorer schools and greater opportunities for deviant influences (Forgatch et al, 1995). Changes of neighbourhoods also results in children losing contact with old friends (Emery, 1999), who may have been important sources of support to them. Thus children's coping resources are disrupted. No information is available in Botswana about perceptions of how low family income affects children's self-image as well as their living arrangements and contact with social network members. These issues will be explored in the present study.

Poverty can also impact on families more generally by increasing levels of stress, tension, sense of stigma and ill health (Kilmurray, 1995). These experiences can affect family relationships and the quality of parenting that parents provide for their children. For example, Forgatch and colleagues (1988) in their American study of the effects of divorce on anti-social behaviour in boys found that mothers' stress levels (including economic stress) affected their discipline practices, which in turn, contributed to their sons' anti-social behaviour.

Different measures have been tried in developed countries to improve the standard of living of children of divorce. These include child support awards and welfare payments. It is however unfortunate though that not all women who are eligible for child support awards actually receive the payments. In their study of lone-parent families in the U.K., Bradshaw and Millar (1991) found that only 29% of their study group received maintenance payments and the sums paid were low. In Botswana, only child support awards have been tried, not welfare payments. Evidence from Botswana presented earlier in the chapter shows that not all children who live in maternal custody families are financially supported by their fathers. This trend is not peculiar to Botswana only, but to other countries as well (both developing and developed).

One factor that has been found to account for the low number of women who receive child support payments in both southern African countries (cf. WILSA, 1991) and America (Kurz, 1996) is women's fear of violence. According to Kurz (1996), most



women in her study 30% reported experiencing fear of violence during child support. The women's fears were strongly related to their experience of violence during marriage. This shows that men's control over women can persist even after the relationship has ended and go far beyond the immediate direct consequences of violence on women, but it can also affect the economic welfare of children. In addition to fear of violence, WILSA (1991) found that other reasons that account for the low number of women who receive child support payments in Zambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Botswana are women's fears of witchcraft on their children by the fathers and / or their families, women's limited knowledge about the laws and their lack of information about aid agencies. The list of reasons that deter women in Southern Africa from filing child support complaints is longer than that which deters their counterparts in some western countries from doing so.

All studies that have focused on child support issues in the various countries that are reviewed so far show that most children are not financially supported by their non-custodial fathers who apparently have more resources than women. Feminists argue that gender inequalities in the division of labour in the home makes women handicapped in their careers in paid employment. This partly contributes to women's inferior economic status compared to that of men, both prior to and after separation. Because women in most countries are custodial parents, their children suffer economic hardship when their fathers stop financially supporting them.

### Literature that focused on domestic violence

Besides issues of custody, child support and economic circumstances, some studies in Botswana have explored the issue of domestic violence (one of the experiences of children whose parents divorce). Scholars such as Mogwe (1988) and Molokomme (1990) have noted that violence against women in Botswana is increasing. According to Molokomme, a perusal of divorce cases brought by women indicates that wife beating is a common problem, and most women had experienced assaults over many years. Some studies on divorce from western countries also show that violence is one of the factors that cause women to divorce. However, they generally do not indicate whether women had stayed in violent marriages for a few or many years. For example, Kurz (1996) in her American study reported that 54% of the women in the sample experienced at least several incidents of violence during the marriage or the



separation, but did not indicate the length of time women stayed in violent relationships. Furthermore, divorce studies from developed countries tend to include physical violence under the words parental conflict and violence, and cruelty, rather than referring to it as violence explicitly. Therefore it becomes unclear whether there was physical violence in marriages or only verbal conflicts which did not end up in violent actions.

Mogwe (1988) found that Botswana women are generally reluctant to report violence in the family to the police. This reluctance partly stems from three factors: 1) lack of services for battered women, so women are aware that even if they report, they are not likely to get any help; 2) society attaches stigma to battered women and some people tend to think that if a woman is battered it is her own fault. 3) women's hopes that things will get better as time goes on. That women's stay in violent relationships because of hopes that things will get better is not peculiar to Botswana women only, but to women in other countries as well (cf. Hoff, 1990). The finding that women in Botswana are generally reluctant to report violence and tend to stay in violent marriages for many years should be understood in the context of attitudes towards marital failure in the country. In Botswana, women are more likely to be blamed for failed marriages than men. The blaming of women rather than men for failed marriages is an example of the power of men to impose their definitions and interpretations within a male-dominated society. Molokomme (1990) contends that the reluctance of battered women to report cases is partly due to the cultural attitude encouraging perseverance, especially on the part of the married women and what seems to be a custom permitting men to chastise their wives. However judges in Botswana are increasingly becoming aware of the problem of battered women and are in fact strongly against it. Molokomme quotes the following words of the court of appeal judge indicating his strong disapproval of wife battering in the case in which a husband had literally beaten his wife to death following a domestic quarrel.

*the law does not and will not recognise what is alleged to be an accepted custom in Botswana, that a husband may physically assault his wife if she incurs his discipline' (p 34).*

Most research on how parental conflicts and violence affects children has been conducted in developed countries and much is known about the issue in these countries. Clinical and non-clinical studies of children and divorce from both Britain

and North America show that parental conflicts and violence before, during and after separation are stressful for children (Wolchik et al, 1985; Johnston et al, 1989; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Cockett and Tripp, 1994). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that inter-parental conflict and not the loss of a parent itself, is the most salient factor that predicts deficits in children's functioning (Emery, 1982; Ahrons, 1983; Long et al, 1987).

Studies from western countries attest to the social, cognitive, emotional and behavioural problems that children who witness parental violence have compared to their counterparts from non-violent homes (Fantuzzo et al, 1991; Peled and Davis, 1995; Kolbo et al, 1996). For example, anger and distress are often exhibited by young children whose parents engage in angry interactions (Cummings et al, 1989; Kashani and Allan, 1998). Not only does witnessing parental conflicts and violence adversely affect young children, it also affects older ones. For example, adolescent boys who witness parental violence have high rates of running away from school and they often use physical violence with their mothers ( Carlson, 1990).

Children who have witnessed parental conflicts and violence are also likely to get depressed (Cascardi and O' Leary, 1992), anxious (Kashani and Allan, 1998) and to have suicidal thoughts (Carlson, 1990). Witnessing parental violence has also been associated with long-term consequences for children's social development. For example, from their American study of the long-term psychological and social impact of witnessing physical conflict between parents, Henning and colleagues (1996) found that women who have witnessed physical conflict between parents tended to display more social maladjustment, poor attachment to significant others and a sense of impoverished social integration, than a comparison group. Not only does witnessing parental violence affect children in the above ways, it can also teach them that: violence is an appropriate form of conflict resolution; violence has a place within family interaction and victims of violence have to tolerate this behaviour (Hedeen, 1997). In addition, violence has direct effects on children because they can become its victims. Some writers (cf. Rusell and Wyatt, 1986; Suh and Abel, 1990; Morley and Mullender, 1994) contend that a man who physically abuses his wife is more likely to abuse his children too. According to this view, both women and children are victims of patriarchal families within a patriarchal society.



So far, we have provided evidence that shows the direct effects of conflict on children in western countries. Researchers such as Fauber et al (1990), McCloskey et al (1995) and Levendosky et al, (2000) however, have found that conflict and parental violence also affect children indirectly. Levendosky and colleagues, for example, in their American study found that most women reported that violence adversely affected their parenting. Some of the women in the study emphasised that the violence that was inflicted on them left them with less amount of emotional energy or time to give their children. Others emphasised their increased anger at their children, while others commented on their own abusive behaviour. The finding that some women in the above cited study linked their own experience of violence to their abusive behaviour towards their children shows that men's violence towards women in the home may lead women to be violent towards children. This is a complex dynamic that can have serious adverse effects on children's lives.

Most of the studies mentioned above are correlational. There are few qualitative studies that have looked into children's experiences of violence and parental conflict. Qualitative case studies that were reviewed by Fantuzzo and Lindquist (1989) reported depression, suicidal behaviour, bed wetting, fears and phobias.

Just as most studies show that witnessing parental conflicts and violence is harmful to children, (as shown above), some researchers have found that children's adjustment improves when conflict declines after divorce (Hetherington et al, 1982; Long et al, 1987; Kitzmann and Emery, 1994).

Contact visits between children and their non-custodial fathers following divorce have also been found to expose children of women who experienced domestic violence to a high risk of abuse. In her American study of children's accounts of domestic violence, Higgins (1994: 22) concluded that 'just as men may use children as a vehicle to abuse mothers, so they may abuse mothers as a means of gaining access to and abusing children'. Higgins's conclusion has serious implications for policies that focus on access of children to their fathers who were abusive prior to the marital rupture. No information is available on the issue of children's contact with fathers who were violent prior to separation in Botswana. This study will among other things explore the issue.

When discussing the relationship between marital conflict and child adjustment



problems, readers should bear in mind that marital conflict varies in frequency and content. All married people experience some degree of conflict in one way or another and not all expressions of marital conflict are stressful to children. Generally, interparental conflict is most harmful to children if it is frequent, intense and physically aggressive, occurs in the child's presence, involves the child in the dispute or remains unresolved (Grych and Fincham, 1990; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Fincham and Osborne, 1993). Grych and Fincham therefore contend that marital conflict can be expressed in different ways, so it is important for researchers to identify which dimensions of marital conflict are related to child problems.

Little work has been done on children's experiences of parental violence as well as how it affects them in Botswana. Although little is known about Botswana children's experiences of parental violence, their experiences are likely to differ from those of children in western countries. This is partly because in Botswana, there are very few social services tailored specifically to meet the needs of children who have lived in violent families. Only one shelter for battered women exists in the whole country, and therefore most women and children do not have access to services, unlike in developed countries. Because witnessing violence in the home has been found to be one of the divorce-related experiences of children in developed countries, this study among other issues will explore children's and mothers' perceptions of violence as well as its effects on children. By so doing, it will fill some of the gaps in existing literature on children's experiences of divorce in Botswana.

So far, the review has focused on divorce related issues that have been researched in Botswana and supplemented this with relevant research from some African countries as well as that from Britain and North America. These are domestic violence, child support as well as child custody. Now attention focuses on issues that have not been researched in Botswana. These are communication with children about divorce, children's feelings, children's relationships with family members as well as their experiences in stepfamilies.

Literature that focused on communication with children about divorce

Existing literature attests to the importance of parents' communication with children

about divorce. Jewett (1994: 35), for example, asserts that 'if parents have separated or are separating, questions from their children are as important and as inevitable as they are when there is a loss through death'. According to Jewett, separation and divorce involve both death and loss - the death of the family unit and the loss of the normal expectations of what life should be. She acknowledges that parents may feel as uneasy about talking to their children about separation or divorce as about death. This is particularly true if they feel responsible for the divorce. For example, a man leaving his family because of another woman may feel guilty about the distress his children will suffer and may prefer not to talk to his children about the separation.

Walczak and Burns (1984) in their British study, found that children who adjusted well had received adequate information and explanations from parents about what was happening, why it was happening and their opinions about contact with non-custodial parents were taken into account. These authors therefore argue that communication between children and their parents was a major determinant of children's adjustment. The importance of parent-child divorce communication has also been shown by Osuwu-Bempah (1995), who examined the relationship between the amount of information a child had about an absent parent and the child's adjustment and academic performance in children in the East Midlands of England. He found that children who adjusted better on measures of behaviour, emotional well-being and academic achievement were those who had information about their absent parent.

Although studies attest to the importance of parent-child divorce communication, some literature shows that most parents are reluctant to communicate with children about divorce (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Walczak and Burns, 1984; Mitchell, 1987). Walczak and Burns interviewed one hundred people in London between the ages of six and 57. All the respondents were under the age of 18 at the time of divorce. The authors found that children lacked information about their parents' divorce and had been confused, unhappy, and many had difficulties in getting in touch with their absent parents. Walczak and Burns included respondents with a wide range of ages in their study. While this allowed them to get 'rich' information, it can result in a situation whereby respondents who have experienced parental divorce a long time ago may have forgotten the events that took place. In my opinion, a person who was below the age of 18 years at the time of parental divorce, but who was 57



years at the time of the interview could have difficulty in recalling some key events and experiences that took place. In particular the person might also have experienced other stressful situations that could shroud the ability to recall the stressfulness or the non-stressfulness of parental divorce and separation.

Similarly, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) in their American study of children and divorce found that a majority of parents had difficulty in communicating with their children about their decision to divorce. They assert that 'no single family in their study was able to provide the children with an adequate opportunity to express their concerns, to recognise with them that the divorce was indeed a crisis, and that while things were likely to be difficult for a while, the expectation was that life would improve' (p 40). The difficulty arose from the following factors: parents did not know how much to tell children; how many details of their intimacy to reveal; when to tell the children; whether to tell the children all together, separately or divide them by age; whether to elaborate on a partner's infidelity, frigidity, or indifference to sex (p 39). According to Wallerstein and Kelly, parents' uncertainty on the above issues stemmed largely from the fact they were apprehensive that their children might be unhappy, frightened or angered by their decision. Parents were also worried about the present and future psychological, social and economic effects of their decision on their children. A major strength of Wallerstein and Kelly's study is that it was longitudinal, and as such it tracked children's responses over time. However, its limitation is that it relied on a clinical sample. Clinical samples do not give a balanced view of children's experiences as they include mainly children who have been adversely affected by divorce.

Research findings that most children of divorce are not given any information on their parents' divorce, nor are they given the opportunity to air their views or ask questions are not consistent with the UN convention section on participation rights. Advocates of children's rights stress the need for children to have information and to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Participation rights include rights to have information, to exercise autonomy and choice, and rights to physical and mental integrity (Alderson, 1994: 45). If children's views on issues of custody, access, etc are not sought by parents, this may result in children being placed in custody of a parent whom they do not prefer. For example, a child who was sexually abused by her father may end up being put in her father's custody following divorce just



because the mother is mentally unwell, whereas if the child had been consulted and her opinions sought, she might have pointed out her views on the issue and other options such as foster care or placement with extended family members could have been considered.

Little is known about the issue of communication with children about divorce in Botswana. This study will help to fill this gap.

### Children's feelings

Children's feelings about divorce immediately after the divorce are likely to differ from their feelings several years later. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) interviewed children a few months after the divorce about their feelings and found that most of them were angry, upset and depressed. Five years later, they found that the intensity of feeling was reduced among the children. Contrary to Wallerstein and Kelly's finding that children's feelings subsided over time, Mitchell (1987) interviewed children five years after the divorce about their feelings of divorce and found that most children in his study still felt angry and upset about their parents' separation. The children also reported that they had hidden their distress from their parents. While parents in Mitchell's sample felt relieved to have separated from a partner they no longer loved, children pointed out that they had been parted from a parent whom they still loved and needed. This shows that parents may tend to think that as long as they are happy, their children are also happy.

Feelings of loss, rejection, anger and fears of abandonment have been found to be common among children (Wallerstein, 1985; Mitchell, 1987). Children tend to feel that if the marital tie can be dissolved, the parent-child relationship can also be dissolved. Not only did some children in Wallerstein's study experience feelings of rejection and fears of abandonment, they also felt overburdened and overwhelmed by the responsibilities they carried in the home. For example, some were responsible for their own care and that of their younger brothers and sisters, while some looked after their depressed parents. Children who were responsible for their own care according to Wallerstein would come home to empty houses, make their own suppers, put themselves to bed, get themselves up in the morning or fail to do so.

Contrary to the above authors' finding that some children felt overburdened by the

divorce related responsibilities, other authors (for example, Weiss, 1979; and Kurdek and Siesky, 1980) found that many children in their studies did not feel this. They believed that they benefited from the divorce in terms of acquiring an understanding of human emotions and developing a sense of maturity and responsibility. Children in Kurdek and Siesky's study however reported that the following experiences were distressing to them: being informed of the divorce, dealing with the loss of the non-custodial parent and adjusting to family circumstances. Most researchers on children and divorce have concentrated on the negative feelings aroused by divorce. The authors cited in this paragraph provide a balanced perspective on children's feelings.

One study that has been conducted in Southern Africa specifically about children and divorce is that by Rosen (1977). She wrote about what children of divorced parents in South Africa felt about access and other aspects of the divorce experience. Her 1979 article focused on crucial issues concerning children of divorced parents. She interviewed 92 people aged between nine and 28 from middle class backgrounds whose parents had divorced six to ten years previously. Out of the ninety-two participants in the study, seventy-three perceived parental conflict as extremely destructive and pointed out that they would not have chosen to have their parents stay together in conflict. Most respondents perceived parental conflict as a greater source of stress than their parents' physical separation. Rosen, however, found that a majority of people in the study wanted to continue a loving relationship with both parents. Rosen's finding that most respondents viewed parental conflict as a major source of stress may imply that children's feelings about divorce were to a greater extent influenced by conflict that existed in their families prior to the divorce, than by the divorce itself. The link between parental violence and children's adjustment problems is not a new finding. It has been postulated by writers in other countries.

Rosen's study is one of the few African studies, which focused specifically on children's experiences of divorce. One of its strengths is that it paid attention to the views of people who experienced the divorce. As such, the information reported consisted of first hand accounts. However, it has limitations because at the time when the interviews were conducted, participants had experienced divorce six to ten years earlier. This length of time is quite long and may create problems of recall in participants. Another limitation of the study is that it included people of a wide age range (nine to 28). This may obscure differences that exist among children.



No information is available in Botswana about how children feel about their parents' separation. This study will therefore help to fill this gap in existing literature.

## Children's relationships with parents

### *Fathers*

Little is known about children's relationships with parents following divorce in Botswana. This study intends to fill this gap. Most studies on the issue have been conducted in developed countries. They show that following divorce, children's contact with fathers tend to diminish and also becomes infrequent (Eekelaar and Clive, 1977; Furstenberg et al, 1987; Seltzer, 1991). It should be noted however that some fathers have interest in maintaining contact with their children, but they are not able to do so because of several factors. One of them is that some custodial parents refuse to allow children to keep in touch with fathers (Richards, 1982a; Walczak and Burns, 1984). Most fathers who participated in Kruk's (1994) comparative study of divorced fathers in Britain and Canada reported that they felt frustrated and depressed as a result of losing their children. According to Richards (1982a: 146/7), other reasons that account for little contact between non-custodial parents and children are: some men's concerns that their visits will upset the children; their beliefs that if they do not see their children, they will not be required to pay maintenance; long distances between fathers and children; the absence of people who encourage fathers to continue contact with their children and the painful and upsetting nature of some access visits for fathers.

Although some studies show that some children and fathers want to maintain contact with each other, such contact can result in its own problems. Researchers such as Johnston et al, 1989, for example, have found that divorce does not necessarily end conflict between parents. It is possible that if children go back and forth between two parents who are not on good terms with each other, they can end up being confused and frustrated due to different parenting styles. For example, the non-custodial parent is likely to be more lenient with children compared to the custodial parent partly because he only sees them once in a while and can be tempted to entice them with toys and expensive things which the custodial parent may not be able to afford. The custodial parent's response to children on their arrival from the non-custodial parent can also frustrate the children. Walczack and Burns (1984) and Mitchell



(1987) provide evidence: that some children in their samples experienced anger and un-welcoming behaviour from their custodial mothers on return from the visits to their fathers, and that some parents had felt curious about their former spouses and questioned children about how their former partners were managing and whether they were making new friends. This kind of response from custodial mothers has made some children feel torn apart between parents. In order for the child to feel comfortable to see the non-custodial parent freely and frequently, a certain level of co-operation between parents is necessary. The co-operation can only be achieved if divorced parents have a low level of conflict or none following divorce.

Several researchers contend that a good relationship with both parents facilitates children's adjustment to divorce ( cf. Richards, 1982a; Peterson and Zill, 1986; and Lamb, 1997). According to Lamb, children's relationships with both parents facilitate their adjustment because two parents can provide mutual instrumental, financial, and emotional support that facilitates parenting as well as resources. They also provide supervision and multiple-role models for children, and this promotes positive development. However, Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis of studies that focused on the effects of parental divorce on children's well being did not find strong evidence that continued contact with non-custodial parents improve children's wellbeing.

### *Mothers*

Some studies have found that not only does divorce affect the quality of the father-child relationship, but it can also affect relationships between children and mothers. According to Hetherington (1999) divorce and related changes may lead to psychological problems among custodial parents (who are usually mothers) such as depression, anxiety, irritability, and impulsive behaviour. These problems adversely affect mothers' ability to be responsive and sensitive to children's needs, hence leads to a deterioration in mother-child relationships. In her 1985 study, for example, Hetherington found that over the first year after divorce, mothers became more authoritarian, reduced the amount of affectionate contact with children, and also increased the number of commands and prohibitions at their children. Hetherington's findings are supported by those of Emery, 1999: 3, who noted that ' Role strain or preoccupation with their own emotional state can lead others to become less nurturant and more harsh in discipline'. This shows that some children not only lose

the support of the absent parent, but they also lose that of the residential parent as well. However, Hetherington noted that many psychological problems that custodial parents experience diminish and parenting improves over the two years following divorce.

It should however be pointed out once more that most studies on divorce and children are correlational and as such, they tend to come up with broad generalisations that are not necessarily applicable in all situations. For example, the assertion that most parents' ability to parent is diminished following divorce overlooks the fact that for some custodial parents, divorce can result in the improvement of parenting skills. This is particularly so if the custodial parent is the one who initiated the divorce as a result of an unhappy marriage. Feeling relieved, the custodial parent can be a better parent after divorce than before. Exploratory studies are likely to point out more clearly the differences between people's experiences. In an exploratory study conducted by Fulton (1979) more wives on average indicated that they were better parents after the divorce than they had been during the marriage. This was partly because they felt that the stress of the marriage depleted their energy and interfered with their parenting. Fulton provides some important insights into the issue of parenting prior to and following divorce. In order for researchers to get a better understanding of the impact of divorce and separation processes on children, it is important for them to (among other things) compare the pre-divorce family situation and functioning with the post-divorce one. Some researchers however tend to report only the post-divorce family situations without highlighting the family situation prior to divorce. If for example, prior to the divorce (during the marriage), the husband was not supporting the family financially, was abusive to both the mother and her children, the end of the marriage may not have had any significant negative outcomes for the children. Fulton's study though has a limitation in the sense that it relied only on parents' reports. No comparisons were made between parents and children's reports.

### Step parent family life

Re-marriage is another important influence on children's post-divorce adjustment. Although much research has focused on how divorce affects children, little has been done on the effects of remarriage on them. Some researchers have contended that although remarriage tend to increase household incomes, living with a stepparent



may create difficulties for children (Elliot and Richards, 1991; Isobel, 1996). For example, the introduction of a new parent in the family may mean “relinquishing a special closeness formed with their parent during a period of single parenthood or giving up roles and tasks which they (*some children-my emphasis*) undertook” (Isobel, 1996: 39). Children can therefore experience feelings of anger, insecurity and jealousy as they compete with their stepparents and step half siblings for their mothers’ affection and time. Some may even display hostile and deviant behaviour. These observations supports Crosbie-Burnett et al, 1988: 309)’s contention that “bringing a new stepparent into the household merely on the basis of economic need does not appear to be in the best interest of children’s emotional needs....”.

Furthermore, children living in step-families are more likely to leave home at an earlier age because of dissatisfaction with their family relationships, than their counterparts in intact or one-parent families (Santrock and Sitterle, 1987; Kiernan, 1992). Parents on the other hand may also feel that the children are being unreasonable and intruding into the marital relationship.

In their review of American literature on step families, Ihinger and Palsey (1987) concluded that regardless of the size of the sample, studies consistently showed that the quality of the step-parent-stepchildren relationship, rather than that of the child and its absent biological parent is the best indicator of a child’s adjustment situation. Factors such as age, gender of the child, the timing of divorce and separation and the way in which the stepparent is introduced into the family have been found to influence the quality of the stepparent-stepchildren relationship. If the stepparent is introduced immediately after the divorce, when children are still adjusting to the breakup, children may feel resentful and experience similar feelings of loss again (Visher and Visher, 1983). Sager et al, (1983) suggest that an optimum period of single parenthood should be at least three years before the introduction of a stepparent. Sager’s suggestion may have its merits, but it can be difficult for some divorced parents to stay for a period of three years without introducing the stepparent to the children. This difficulty may arise from the fact that after divorce, some parents may be looking forward to starting if not continuing their social lives as soon as possible without any disturbances or monitoring from their ex-husbands as they no longer live with them in the same compound.



Age has also been found to influence step-children's adjustment. Burgoyne and Clark (1984) studied step families in Sheffield and concluded that the younger the child was when parents got married, the easier it was for the family to rebuild 'an ordinary unremarkable domestic life together' (pp152-161). This is mainly so because very young children have fewer memories of former family experiences. In contrast, Ferri (1984) noted that gender rather than age is a better indicator of the quality of step family relationships. According to her, girls generally have more negative problematic relationships with their stepparents than boys.

On a more positive note, new and loving relationships can be formed as a result of the creation of a stepfamily. According to Brown and Robinson (1986: 131), having a step family is 'typically beneficial for children' because a step family can provide children with positive role models and feelings of stability after their experiences of a destructive marital relationship between their biological parents. They can receive care and attention from stepparents, stepsiblings and step grandparents. Visher and Visher (1979) found that on the whole, stepsiblings have a better relationship with each other than they do with their stepparents. This may be related to the fact that they have shared experiences and because their expectations of these relationships are more realistic. Research on the impact of step family life on children's academic and psychological functioning generally shows that step family life does not have significant effects on the children in the long run ( see Sager et al, 1983, review of research on step families).

Little is known about children's experiences in stepfamilies in Botswana. This study will among other things explore this issue. By so doing, it will fill some of the gaps in existing literature.

## **Conclusion**

It has been demonstrated in this chapter that divorce and separation are processes that are not experienced homogeneously by all children. The chapter has shown that some effects can be short term, while others can be long term. Similarly, some effects can be positive, negative or mixed. It however seems reasonable for one to conclude that the negative impact of divorce on children can be large if they are exposed to parental arguments, conflicts and violence; if they lack support from family and social network members, if they experience a sharp decline in their standard of living; if

they experience negative changes in relationships with their parents and change of neighbourhoods and schools. If they experience no or few of the above transitions, the impact can be small.

One theme that emerged from the review of literature from both developing and developed countries is the prevalence of gender inequalities and their effects on children. The inequalities were more prominent in relation to domestic violence, child support, and child custody. These issues are interrelated. For example, women's low economic and social position can result in them losing custody of children though this is less true of Botswana than other developing countries of Africa. Some women's fear of violence affects their ability to negotiate for adequate child support payments. The low position of women relative to that of men in many societies indeed has implications not only for women's quality of life but also for their children's welfare.

The chapter has also shown that most studies have been conducted in developed countries. Findings from developed countries may not be applicable to developing countries because of different social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds. Furthermore, some of the studies from developed countries have sought opinions of people who experienced divorce a long time (e.g. more than 30 years) from the period when studies were conducted. This can result in respondents having difficulties in recalling some of their experiences as well as how they affected them. The present study avoided this problem by interviewing children whose experiences of parental divorce were recent (i.e. four or fewer years from the time of the interview). Most studies that originate in western countries are quantitative, therefore they do not explain the actual processes, but only report the outcomes. This study is qualitative in nature, and will fill a gap in existing literature.

African studies that have been conducted on children and divorce are rare. Most studies focused on child custody and economic issues and were based on interviews with mothers. Children's perceptions have largely been neglected. The present study redresses weaknesses of existing studies by a) adopting a holistic approach to children's welfare. It focuses on children's welfare as a whole (economic, psychological and social aspects), rather than only on economic issues; b) Including the voices and perceptions of children. The main thrust of this study is that children

are active and constructive members who are capable of making sense of and articulating their experiences, just like adults. A study which views children in the above terms necessitates the use of methods which are dynamic and interactional. These are described in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER 4

### Research Design and Methodological Issues

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the design of the study and methods that were used. The detailed description includes the following: a discussion of the reasons why the particular methods were chosen; sample selection; how access to respondents was acquired; the interview process; themes that were covered in the interviews and techniques that were utilised to increase the extent to which respondents could provide detailed information. This chapter also highlights problems that were encountered.

#### *A Qualitative Approach*

The methodology for this study was informed by the social constructionist paradigm in particular and the 'sociology of childhood' approach. My interest in the meanings which children attached to their experiences led me to favour the development of a qualitative methodology. A qualitative approach was also adopted because no study has been conducted in Botswana on children's experiences of divorce. Furthermore, my concern with perceptions of divorce as a process, not a single event, favoured the use of a qualitative approach.

The difference between qualitative and quantitative research has been articulated by Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 4) who contended that

'Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Qualitative studies emphasise the value-laden nature of inquiry, and they seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. In contrast, quantitative studies emphasise the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes and inquiry is purported to be within a value free framework'.

Qualitative methods usually use interviews and participant observations as major techniques of data collection, while quantitative methods tend to use the social survey largely with questionnaires (especially in sociology) and experiments, as in psychology (Bryman, 1988). This study is a survey of families and the main method of data collection was interviews. As Yarrow, (1960: 561), noted 'The interview is a technique particularly well adapted for uncovering subjective definitions of experiences....'. Qualitative research questions are focused on eliciting the subjective experiences of respondents to understand better their perceptions, feelings, values, images, beliefs, strengths, and support systems.

The sociology of childhood approach views children as active agents who are capable of articulating their experiences. As such, interviews were conducted with children. Collecting data from children, as Morrow and Richards (1996: 95) note 'is an obvious way to gain insight into children's lives and experiences'. Their mothers were also interviewed to compare perspectives. However, the main focus was on children's accounts. Separate individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with children and mothers. Holding separate interviews for children and their parents is essential as it 'minimises the possibility of influence or intimidation, and ensures that individuals concerned could feel free to give their own perspective on the situation in privacy and without fear of repercussions' (Laybourn et al, 1996: 18). The researcher herself conducted all interviews. This allowed the necessary probing from an interviewer with skills in communication and professional social work knowledge. It also ensured consistency and direct access to data.

The concept of resilience as well as some concepts of social network, family stress and feminist theories influenced themes which respondents were asked to talk about. For example, questions about stress and coping were derived from family stress theory.

### Sampling decisions

Purposive<sup>8</sup> rather than random sampling was used because there was no readily accessible list of relevant families from which to take a random sample. In order to

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<sup>8</sup> According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994: 202), '...Many qualitative researchers employ purposive and not random sampling. They seek out groups, settings and individuals where (and for whom) the processes being studied are most likely to occur'.

cut down the number of factors that have to be taken into account in making comparisons, certain restrictions were placed on the types of families that were studied.

The following criteria were used to select participants for the sample.

1. Gender (mothers only).
2. Location (People living in or near Gaborone).
3. Age ( Children who were between the ages of eight and 17 during the period of parental separation divorce)
4. Duration (Families that had experienced separation four or less years from the period of the interviews, i.e. between 1995 and 1998).

Within the above criteria, I tried to include people from a wide range of backgrounds (religious, educational, ethnic, socio-economic, etc).

Divorced mothers rather than fathers were included in this study because maternal custody is the most prevalent arrangement in Botswana, as noted in chapter one. Although including fathers in the sample would add a dimension of gender differences in parental reports, it would have been difficult to get a sufficient number of fathers that would enable us to derive valuable conclusions as there are very few fathers who have custody of children in the country. Furthermore, time constraints did not allow me to interview non-custodial fathers. In addition, custodial mothers rather than non-custodial mothers and fathers are uniquely situated to serve as observers of their children's social networks and post-divorce adjustment because they are the adults who have normally spent the most time with the children.

About three-quarters of respondents were residents of Gaborone (the Capital City of Botswana), and the rest came from areas within a radius of 80km from Gaborone. These are Lobatse, Ramotswa, Kanye, Mochudi and Kopong. It was initially planned that respondents would come from Gaborone only, but problems were encountered in locating participants in Gaborone partly because some people whose names were obtained from court records had changed addresses. The location was chosen because most people migrate from rural to urban areas of the country, especially to the capital city leaving kin members in rural areas who in traditional Botswana (prior to industrialisation and urbanisation) played a crucial role in providing support to family members. Divorced women and their children in traditional Botswana were



absorbed in the traditional self-sufficient joint family organisation and taken care of by members of their kin. This practice has declined drastically in modern Botswana, especially in urban areas, partly for two reasons: a) Some people work and live in towns (far from kin) and this places constraints on their ability to help each other; b) The money economy limits the extent to which people can provide material and accommodation services to one another, both under normal circumstances and during periods of family crises such as divorce ( Kooijman, 1978; Ndulo, 1984; Himonga, 1985).

Children's ages (between the ages of eight and 17 during the time of parental separation and divorce) were chosen because several scholars, for example (Amato and Ochiltree, 1987) have found that children from about the age of seven have adequate verbal ability and understanding to cope with an interview about family life.

The period of four years was chosen because the researcher thought that interviewing children who had experienced parental separation and divorce many years ago might not yield very useful data as some children might not recall in detail the events that took place. To interview children who are close to the point of separation purely for the purpose of research might have been too distressing for them ( Mitchell, 1985). Later (i.e. after a few years of the experience of parental divorce), they are more likely to take a more balanced view.

Since qualitative research is mainly concerned with understanding people's experiences, behaviour, and perceptions in detail, a large sample is not necessary for qualitative studies (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). A total of 25 families were included in this study. One mother and one of her children were interviewed in each family. In addition, a total of ten siblings from ten of the 25 families participated in the study. Below are the characteristics of the respondents.

**Table 1 - Children's Ages**

Between 10 and 15	10
Between 16 and 21	15
Total	25

**Table 2 – Children's Gender**

Boys	11
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Girls	14
Total	25

Table 1 shows that ten of the 25 children in the study were between the ages of ten and 15, while 15 were between 16 and 21. Table 2 shows children's gender. Eleven children were boys while 14 were girls.

**Table 3 - Number of Children in Families**

Between 1 and 2	8
Between 3 and 4	14
Between 5 and 6	3
Total	25

**Table 4 - Time since parental physical separation**

2 or less years prior to the interview	More than 2 years
8	17

Table 3 shows that most families (14) in the study had between three and four children. In eight families, there were between one and two children, while there were only three families that had between five and six children. In table 4, we find that eight children had experienced parental physical separation two or less years prior to the time of the study, while 17 experienced it more than two years prior to the interview.

**Table 5 - Mothers' Ages**

Between 25 and 29	1
Between 30 and 35	6
Between 36 and 40	5
Between 41 and 45	12
Between 46 and 50	1
Total	25

Table 5 shows that the ages of mothers who participated in this study ranged between 25 and 50. More specifically, one mother was between 25 and 29 years; six were between the ages of 30 and 35; five were between 36 and 40; 12 were between 41 and 45 and only one was between 46 and 50 years.



**Table 6 - Mothers' Occupations after Divorce**

Manual	15
Professional	10
Total	25

**Table 7 - Fathers' Occupations**

Manual	8
Professional	17
Total	25

Table 6 shows that most mothers in the study worked in manual jobs, while table 7 shows that a majority of fathers worked in professional / high paying jobs. This reflects the socio-demographic pattern of the wider population from which the sample was drawn. For instance, people who largely use the high courts to divorce are usually: urban residents and / or people of middle or high-class economic backgrounds. The above groups of people are likely to use the high courts because they can afford to pay for legal services and are more informed about the existence of such services than their counterparts who live in rural areas and whose economic background is low. Consideration was given to seeking respondents by other means to gain a wider socio-economic spread, but this was not possible for practical reasons.

#### Issues of recruitment, access and consent

The first step, which I underwent before collecting data in Botswana, was to apply for formal government permission. This is a procedure that all researchers intending to collect data in Botswana have to go through. Three months elapsed before I was given the permission. The permission process took about three months because the application went through several bodies such as the relevant ministries and the courts.

In order to obtain an appropriate cross-section of families, I located families through a search of some Gaborone customary courts and the Lobatse high court separation and divorce records for the years 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998. I searched for custodial mothers who had children who were between the ages of eight and 17 during the period of parental separation and divorce. Initially, I had planned to select an equal number of families from both customary courts and the high court. However, this



approach was abandoned because some customary court records were either incomplete (in relation to particulars of mothers and children) or were non-existent.

Although I had the option of getting access to families through professionals such as social workers, psychiatrists, church ministers, family welfare educators and district commissioners, such an approach would have provided me with a clinical sample, which would be biased towards families with difficulties. The sample in this study was therefore a non-clinical one, and as such it is more reflective of children of divorcing parents in Botswana. Children's experiences of separation and divorce together with their responses have been found to be affected by parents' economic, ethnic and educational backgrounds (Hetherington, 1981), so a wide range of families were appointed to participate in this study as shown in tables 4.1 up to 4.7). This ensured that experiences of a diverse population would be captured.

Most mothers approached (except three) agreed to participate despite the fact that the study focused on an intimate issue. This was a high response rate. The objectives of the study and methods that were used in the study were explained to mothers and their children. They were advised that they should not feel pressurised to take part in the study nor should they feel pressurised to answer all the questions. Participants were also assured of confidentiality and anonymity and that their identities would not be revealed in any publication. I also stressed to the children that the information, which they would reveal, would not be shared with their siblings nor with their parents under any circumstances, except if there was evidence of current child abuse. Respondents' permission to record the interviews was sought, and all except two agreed. Their permission to quote verbatim from the tape was also requested and they were told that pseudonyms would be used to maintain confidentiality. I explained that the reason for recording the interviews was to enable me to get accurate information from their reports. Tape recording also allowed me to be attentive to responses during the interview process and to probe. Mothers and children who agreed to participate in the study were required to sign a consent form indicating their agreement. However, most participants gave verbal consent rather than endorsing their signatures.

It was important to obtain insights into siblings differences but time did not permit seeing all the children in the sibling families. Therefore it was decided to see two



children in ten of the 25 families. Permission was obtained from ten mothers who felt that it was in the best interests of the child to participate in the interview and / or pointed out from the onset that more than one of their children was willing to be interviewed and was in Gaborone or one of the surrounding villages covered in this study. It should be noted here that not all siblings were readily available to participate in the interviews because of several factors. First, some were staying away from home in boarding schools, while others were away visiting friends and relatives at the time of the interviews. Second, some families did not have more than one child who was between the ages of 10 and 21. In families where there was more than one child who was between 10 and 21, the eldest available, and willing, child was chosen. This was in line with mothers' preferences that I should interview older rather than younger children. They believed that younger children would not be able to understand some of the issues discussed as they were too young when the separation took place or would not cope as some of the issues discussed may make them sad. Six of the ten siblings were between the ages of 10 and 15, while four were between 16 and 21 years. They composed of four boys and six girls.

### The value of understanding different perspectives

The purpose of holding separate interviews with children and mothers is that this was intended to yield insight into their different, sometimes complementary and occasionally conflicting, perspectives. Obtaining perspectives from mothers and children increased our awareness of the dynamics that take place in families undergoing transitions. According to the social constructionist approach, each individual has his or her constructions / perceptions of reality, therefore it is possible that children and mothers' perceptions of the divorce may differ. The approach also acknowledges that in addition to individual constructions that each person has, there are family and societal constructions. Since mothers and children belong to the same families, some of their constructions are shared, therefore they had similar perspectives on some issues. In their study of children, parents and risk, Hood and colleagues (1996) found that while some of the children's constructions of risk were similar to their parents', children also constructed and negotiated their own understandings. Obtaining information from children and parents enabled the researcher to identify similarities and differences between parents' and children's reports. This process is known as perspective triangulation in the research literature.

Some studies which have focused on parents' and children's reports indicate that children may sometimes give fuller and more vivid descriptions of the perceived effects of certain situations on them than their parents (see Laybourn et al, 1996; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980).

### **Pilot study**

A pilot study was carried out to test the approach and the content. The pilot study also ascertained the clarity of questions in the interview schedule. It comprised four interviews (two with children and the other two with their mothers). Respondents were asked to comment on the content of the interview schedule at the end of the interview. Their comments proved useful as they allowed the researcher to identify areas of improvement. For example, questions which respondents felt were not clear were modified. Initially I had planned to use social network maps so that respondents could list children's network members by name, but the approach was abandoned as a result of suggestions of participants who participated in the pilot study. They felt uncomfortable about listing their social network members by name.

### ***Interviews***

I told each respondent that I was interested in hearing their views of children's experiences of separation and divorce and that I was gathering material through interviews. After my explanation about the research, I gave respondents the opportunity to ask me questions. I also gave them the option to speak in Setswana or English whichever they felt more comfortable with. All respondents, except three, preferred to be interviewed in Setswana. A standard translation of the interview schedule into Setswana that was done by an expert in translation was used.

A majority of interviews were conducted either at the respondents' homes or the researcher's office. A few were held in the researcher's car. The respondents made the choice of place themselves. Most children's interviews lasted for between one and two and a half hours, while mothers' interviews lasted for between two and four hours. Mothers had the tendency to get carried away with the discussion and talk about their own experiences, rather than children's. On several occasions, the interviewer had to remind them of the focus of the interview. Children, on the other



hand, gave fuller and more vivid descriptions of their own experiences.

Unbiased / neutral practices such as those below were used to elicit responses from respondents: the type of questions that I posed acknowledged alternative sides of the issues (i.e. I asked about positive and negative aspects of divorce and separation on children's lives/ what the children felt they had lost and what they had gained as a result of the divorce; strengths and weaknesses of network members, etc); I was also cautious about the use of my non-verbal cues so that I did not influence the way respondents answered the questions. For example, when some children reported about their experiences of witnessing 'severe' parental violence, I avoided showing surprise, but kept calm and encouraged them to tell me more about the experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (1997: 117) therefore contend that

‘ the successful implementation of neutral practices elicits truths held in the vessel of answers behind the respondents’.

They further assert that the use of neutral practices also makes the results more valid.

When interviewing, I avoided using complicated vocabulary, which children might have difficulty in understanding, since children's vocabulary tends to be limited. I therefore checked with the children if they understood what I am saying, if they did not, I used different statements and phrases so that they could understand. The above practice is consistent with Mahon et al's (1996: 149) contention that 'when interviewing children, it is important that children understand the questions asked of them and that researchers understand what children are saying; that the children are understood as well as (literally) understanding.'

It was initially planned that mothers would be interviewed once, while children would be interviewed twice because the study's main emphasis was on children's views and experiences, so interviewing children twice would enable them to discuss the issues in detail. However, the plan was abandoned because of practical constraints.

### Rationale for using interviews

Most family behaviour takes place 'behind closed doors', in a non-public place therefore it is difficult to observe, hence the interview is the most efficient and often

the most feasible method of collecting data about families (LaRossa et al, 1981). A majority of family researchers tend to use semi-structured interviews, rather than highly standardised interviews, with a set of themes or mainly open-ended questions used flexibly (e.g. Laybourn et al, 1996; Roberts et al, 1993). However, individual interviews are not the only type of interviews that can be used in family research. Group and family interviews can also be used. Family interviews have been largely used in the United States.

Individual interviews were used for this study because of the sensitive nature of the issue studied. They are more personalised and private, compared to group discussions, so respondents are more likely to be open about sensitive issues, experiences and feelings in a one-to-one situation rather than in a group. Group interviews were not considered appropriate for this study because it was assumed that they could make some children feel uncomfortable about discussing their family situations and experiences. In addition, research on children's issues in Africa is still in its infancy and children are not accustomed to being brought together for research purposes in the form of a group. This may not be the case in developed countries where research about children's issues started a long time ago. In addition, the study largely involved children who did not know each other, and as such it would have been difficult for them to trust each other in a short period of time. Thus Hill (1997: 6) contends that 'children will probably talk more freely in established groups, than when brought together purely for the research'. Interviews also increased the extent to which respondents engaged in open ended discussions of the issues and enabled the researcher to probe when there was need.

Furthermore, interviews enable improved response rates compared to postal questionnaires. Other reasons for using interviews in this study are that they: enable the researcher to provide a prepared explanation of the purpose of the study more convincingly than a covering letter can; will more easily reach less well educated respondents; help the ones with reading difficulties; offer standardised explanations to certain questions that arise; prevent many misunderstandings and maintain control over the order in which the questions are answered (The Open University, 1979: 49).

Despite the above advantages of semi-structured interviews, they also have some disadvantages. For example, they are expensive and time consuming compared with



questionnaires and standard interviews though not necessarily compared with observation because of the costly coding operations, which arise from the use of many open-ended questions. Interviews may also result in the problem of interviewer bias. For example, the interviewer may use probes inconsistently and/or may not record all responses (but may prefer to record only those she/he wants). Lastly, interviewers differ in their ability to sustain rapport with respondents and this may affect both the quality and quantity of the information collected from respondents.

### ***Other data collection methods that have been used in research with children***

Other methods that have been used in research with children include self-completion questionnaires, observation and standard scales. Questionnaires require a certain level of literacy, so some children may not be able to understand some of the questions in the questionnaires. Some researchers in Britain have found that many young people find questionnaires irrelevant or difficult to complete (Freeman et al, 1996). In addition, questionnaires largely rely on the use of closed-ended questions, and close-ended questions do not allow respondents to answer the questions in any way they wish. They force the respondents to choose between the answers provided and sometimes the appropriate answer may not be included on the list. It should however be noted that close-ended questions are less time-consuming for respondents. Participant observation was not suitable for this study because it is used to study ongoing processes. It was clearly not feasible to observe the processes of separation and divorce as they occurred prospectively in a number of families. Instead the present study focused on children and mothers' retrospective accounts of what transpired.

Other methods that have been used in research work with children are those that measure behaviour such as standard scales and psychological tests/measurements. Such methods were not considered appropriate as the emphasis of this study is on how people themselves describe and explain what they have experienced and what has happened. In addition, standard scales and psychological tests have largely been used in correlational and/or longitudinal studies to assess change over time. Since this study is cross-sectional and exploratory, there is less need for the use of the above methods.



## ***Types of research studies on children's issues***

Research studies on children's issues can be cross-sectional or longitudinal. Cross-sectional studies look at a group of children at one point in time. Such studies are useful, but limited as they can only study children at one point in their development (Emery, 1988; Neil, 1995), and with respect to the current topic at a certain time since the divorce or separation. Longitudinal studies on the other hand follow a group of children over several years. This type of research is helpful as it can enable researchers to track children's experiences over a period. In the area of children and divorce, scholars such as Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) and Hetherington in the United States have conducted longitudinal studies. Longitudinal studies are not undertaken frequently because they take longer and require long-term funding. Due to time and funding constraints, this study used a cross-sectional approach, but took account of processes over-time retrospectively, while recognising that this raises problems about recall, selectivity and hindsight.

Several authors (e.g. Bachman and O' Malley, 1981; Foddy, 1993) have contended that the rate of forgetting increases over time. Respondents who are interviewed about the events they experienced a long time ago are therefore less likely to remember all their experiences compared to those whose experiences are recent. Respondents in this study had experienced separation and divorce four or fewer years before the time of the interview. Four years was considered to be a reasonable period for both children and mothers to recall the events that took place, particularly because divorce is not a static event, but a process which continues to affect the lives of children over a prolonged period of time. Some children may therefore have been still experiencing some divorce-related events at the time of the interview. The concept of hindsight means that some respondents will remember some things, while others will not. This was addressed by requesting respondents to take their time to recall accurately and giving them more time to do so (Cannell et al, 1981) and using social encouragements, such as encouraging respondents to give more information if they gave shallow answers (Cannell et al, 1981; Foddy, 1993).

### **Themes**

A number of themes and sub-themes were covered. The style and content of each interview depended on who was interviewed. The themes that were covered include:

- A. The child's perception, feelings, attitudes towards the divorce and separation, and understanding of parental separation and divorce.
- B. Communication about divorce and help seeking.
- C. The perceived impact of divorce and divorce related events on the child.  
Divorce related events include: absence of fathers from the homes, parental violence; changes in parent-child relationships; economic changes; movements from one residential area to another; changes of schools, step family life and one parent family life.
- D. The role of social network members in the adjustment of children prior to, during and after parental separation. Under this theme, focus was on network members who provided support to children, the type of support that children were provided with prior to, during and after parental separation and divorce (e.g. listening to problems, economic/material, etc); network members who were not supportive to children or who constituted major sources of strain for children, what they did or did not do, how they behaved and how their actions and behaviours affected children's adjustment; effects of separation on the network, e.g. loss of contact with paternal kin, friends from the previous neighbourhood, etc; problems which children encountered in their social networks; and strengths and weaknesses of the social networks
- E. Children's coping strategies.

### Establishing rapport

As qualitative research usually seeks to understand people's experiences, perceptions and feelings, some people may feel uneasy about speaking about their lives to a stranger. It is therefore important that the researcher creates an environment that enables respondents to provide information comfortably, while at the same time the researcher remains professional. To establish rapport, I started each interview with an informal conversation. The type of attire that I wore was also appropriate for the type of family/families that I was interviewing. In other words, it would not have been appropriate for me to dress in very formal clothes when I was going to interview a poor family because this might have adversely affected the establishment of rapport between the poor family and myself. On the other hand, it would be appropriate for me to put on formal clothes if I was going to interview a high-income family. Furthermore, the fact that the interviews were conducted in the language which



respondents felt comfortable in to some extent may have facilitated the establishment of rapport. Other ways that were used to enable respondents to provide detailed information were: to ask threatening questions towards the end of the interviews rather than at the beginning; to use more open-ended questions as well as probes; and to emphasise to respondents that the information they were going to reveal was confidential and that anonymity would be maintained.

### ***Circumstances that may have influenced the data collected***

The fact that some interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes may have improved the quality of data obtained. This may be particularly so because '.....it is assumed that natural geographic and social milieus provide the richest possible context for the study of family life' (LaRossa and Wolf, 1985: 535). LaRossa and Wolf however contend that collecting data from families in their native habitats raises special ethical considerations. For example, the informal atmosphere that prevails in the home may encourage friendliness, trust and self-disclosure, and in such settings, researchers / field workers are treated as guests as well as researchers. For example, respondents usually buy cakes and other nice welcoming things for researchers. The double role of researchers according to LaRossa and Wolf has ethical implications in the sense that home interviews/observations may 'lull some families into disclosing more about themselves than they had originally planned' (p 307).

Another circumstance that might have affected the data was that I was a stranger to the children, so some might have kept some secrets from me about their families. I asked the children about their private lives and they chose what they wanted to divulge and what they preferred to keep hidden.

The issue of power relationships within the research process might also have had an impact upon the data. As Moore and colleagues (1996) suggest power differentials between researchers and the researched tend to intrude in the research process. These authors contend that the problem is magnified where children are involved, as children may try to 'please and so defer to adults' (p 140).



Respondents' accounts were related in a specific situation - a research interview. This has its constraints and dynamics. In interview situations, respondents' accounts are to some extent shaped by interviewers' questions, their way of talking and the topics discussed. Because of the influence of the above issues in respondents' accounts, the interview gives us snapshots and a concentration of ideas and experiences. Kugelberg (1995: 21) contends that 'One problem is how to translate and understand these bits and pieces which do not necessarily form a congruent pattern of ideas and images'. In addition, respondents' accounts can be shaped by their perceptions of the interviewer. In the present study, for example, I, a local woman who speaks the same language as the respondents conducted the interviews. Respondents' perceptions of what information I wanted, as well as differences and similarities that existed between us may have shaped their responses. In other words, it is possible that a different interviewer interviewing the same respondents about their experiences might have been provided with different explanations and accounts. This perspective prompts us to treat respondents' accounts as constructions that are socially situated, rather than objective realities.

Another circumstance that may have had an impact on the data is that the process of interpreting experiences was not performed by respondents only, I also engaged in the process. This makes the interviewer a participant. As Crick (1982) states in the interview situation, both anthropologist – *interviewer* (my emphasis) and informant are involved in creating meaning. The meanings I gave to respondents' accounts were to some extent influenced by my advance knowledge of the local culture. Doing research in my own culture therefore has certain benefits, as well as shortcomings. One problem is that although both the respondents and myself speak the same language, we may not give the words we use the same meaning. I may interpret respondents' words within my own system of meaning. On a positive note, doing research in my own culture is beneficial because I have invaluable knowledge of my language and society that takes a long time to gain (see also Kugelberg, 1995).

### ***Ethical Issues***

While it is important for qualitative researchers to try to maximise the extent to which rapport is established between themselves and respondents, and the extent to

which respondents can identify with them so that they can be able to provide good quality information comfortably, it is possible that some issues which are raised in the interview process may be too upsetting to respondents. For example, a few children became upset during the interview, particularly those who had not talked about the issue with anybody in the past. Amato and Ochiltree (1987) cautions researchers that when interviewing children, one has to monitor the child's emotional state during the session, be aware of signs of stress, and occasionally provide reassurance that the interview is proceeding satisfactorily. Although children who got upset were given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview, none did. At the end of each interview, I asked each participant if she / he felt she needed help, e.g. referral to counselling. None said they wanted counselling, but most children and mothers wanted help as to how the children's fathers could financially support them. I took several steps to link children and mothers with services.

Not all mothers who were approached agreed to participate. Three did not. This meant that their children did not participate either. The role of parents as gatekeepers to children raises ethical questions concerning the consent of children to participation in research. The fact that mothers were approached before children and they refused to participate meant that children's views were excluded from the onset. This shows that children's ability to participate was influenced by their social positioning as inferiors to their mothers.

### Issues of translation

Although an expert in translation translated the interview schedule into Setswana, not all transcripts were translated into English by a translation expert. I translated only two and then gave them to a translation expert to check. It was not possible for all transcripts to be translated into English by an expert in translation because the exercise proved to be extremely costly, tedious and cumbersome.

Translating respondents' accounts from Setswana to English may have affected the quality of data, and some rich meanings in the data may have been lost. This is particularly so because Batswana usually express themselves by using metaphors, proverbs and idioms to enrich their discussions. Translating the above features is difficult.



## Record keeping

All interviews, except two, were recorded on audiotape and each tape was listened to carefully after each interview. Audio taping interviews preserved data that the researcher might have missed while taking notes. It also served to validate data. In addition, it allowed me to focus more on what the respondents were saying. Notes were taken for the two respondents who did not feel comfortable with the use of a tape recorder. They raised concerns about confidentiality. Fieldnotes were also written up immediately after the interviews (often including, important material which emerged when the tape recorder was stopped). Ongoing reflection on the data throughout the fieldwork was made as is the procedure with most qualitative research (Walker, 1985; Silverman, 1993; Laybourn et al, 1996).

## Data analysis

Data was subjected to qualitative analysis. The value of qualitative analysis itself lies in the density of information, vividness and clarity of meaning yielded by the data (Jick and Tood, 1979). Thus children and mothers' accounts of divorce in their own words form an essential component of this thesis. In qualitative research, data analysis and collection are not completely independent processes. They frequently take place simultaneously. As such, analysis started from the first day data was collected, and continued throughout the whole period of data collection. The transcription process was largely carried out by the author. This was time-consuming but allowed for reflection on the content.

In analysing data for this study, I was guided by Marshall and Rossman's (1989: 114) ideas of data 'reduction' and 'interpretation'. Data reduction and interpretation involves the sorting of data into categories distinguished by 'codes' or 'headings'. According to Creswell (1994: 154), in data reduction and interpretation, 'the researcher takes a voluminous amount of information and reduces it to certain patterns, categories, or themes and then interprets this information by using some schema. Marshall and Rossman (1989: 115), contend that the phase of generating categories and themes 'demands a heightened awareness of the data, a focused attention to those data....' The first step of reduction therefore involved reading through all the transcripts and jotting down major themes that appeared in respondents' accounts. Marshall and Rossman call these 'indigenous typologies'.



They define indigenous typologies as ‘those created and expressed by participants, and generated through analysis of the local use of language’ (116). Indigenous typologies that were generated include children as active agents, violence, economic changes, resiliency / coping well as well as emotional and behavioural effects of separation and related processes on children. In addition to the above themes, more categories were devised by the researcher (i.e. analyst-constructed typologies) largely from the interview schedule. These included violence in the family during the pre-separation period, father absence, economic changes prior to and after separation, communication, the nature of children’s relationships with family and social network members prior to and after separation, as well as the role of both family and social network members in children’s adjustment. A closer examination of the typologies generated showed that categories of violence and economic changes were both generated by respondents themselves as well as the researcher. Before moving on to the next step, which is outlined below, I ensured that all material was grouped under broad headings.

The next step was to re-distribute data into subcategories that existed within each of the broad themes / categories. For example, From the theme of violence in the family, the following subcategories were created:

**Table 8 - Subcategories that were created from the category of violence in the family**

<i>First level subcategories</i>	<i>Second level subcategories</i>
Types of violence	Physical, verbal, emotional
On whom	Mothers, children or on both
Dimensions of violence	Frequency, intensity, duration
Perceptions of why violence took place	Men’s complaints about many things in the family, men’s intentions to chase wives from the marital homes so that they could leave with other women, and wives’ reluctance to move, women’s suggestions to men to stop adulterous behaviours, alcoholism, other reasons, don’t know
Why women stayed in violent relationships	Fear of economic hardship, religious beliefs, fear of stigma, socialisation related factors,

	etc
Effects of witnessing violence on children	On their emotions; On their attitudes towards fathers, On other aspects of children's lives
Effects of being victims of violence on children	On their physical wellbeing; On their emotional wellbeing
Effects of violence on how mothers related to children	Adverse effects; No reported effects
How children coped with violence	Crying, spending most time outside the home, physically intervening to stop fathers from hitting mothers, etc.

As the process of analysis unfolded, I was constantly looking not only for patterns reflecting the majority experiences, but also for exceptional cases that I later incorporated into the qualitative story. For example, although most children said witnessing violence made them hate and / or dislike their fathers, a few said the violence made them have mixed attitudes towards fathers. Accounts by such children were exceptional within the small sample and are therefore incorporated in the thesis.

After identifying all major categories and subcategories, I converted all the transcripts into a format that the 'Nudist' computer programme recognised and saved them in the 'Nudist' programme. I then created codes for the categories and subcategories. Nudist allows the researcher to identify text segments, attach category labels to the segments, and sort for all text segments that relate to a specific category. This function was extremely helpful as it speeded the analysis of material for this study. For example when I wrote the section on 'the effects of violence on children', I relied to a large extent on the codes generated using 'Nudist' that related specifically to the effects of violence on children.

The next step in analysis was interpretation. It is difficult to describe the steps followed in interpretation because it is a creative process whereby meaning is given to raw data (see also Bradby, 1996). I approached this stage by continually reviewing



the data so that qualitative connections between categories and subcategories became apparent. I searched for various types of connections. First, I searched for what mothers and children reported to be causal. An example of this is the below quote that shows how a child felt about her father's absence from the home: 'I am happy about it, life is better in the home, there is no violence....'. Second, I searched for links within cases, which were found several times. For example children who viewed their relationships with fathers prior to separation as close, expressed more intense feelings of sadness about father absence than their counterparts who did not view the relationships as close. Some children developed negative attitudes towards their fathers as a result of their witnessing of parental violence. According to their accounts, these attitudes were more intense for most children during the time immediately following separation. Third, I searched for patterns which appeared to be linked to gender, age, time since separation, socio-economic background, etc. However, the extent to which a search for the influence of factors such as age, gender, etc was done was limited by the small sample size. The aim of the study was not to look for statistically significant variables, but attention was paid more to how respondents made sense of children's experiences of separation.

### ***Problems encountered in the course of field work***

Several problems were encountered during the field work stage. Firstly, access to participants was a much slower process than anticipated and this meant that a long time (about one year) was spent collecting data. The following circumstances made access time consuming: a) some court records did not have addresses of mothers. I therefore had to use lawyers to help me. Some lawyers were co-operative, while others were not. b) Some mothers whose names I collected from the courts had moved and changed addresses. This meant several trips to the high court to look for more names. c) Some of those who were located missed appointments.

Secondly, access to younger children was very difficult. This was because most mothers did not want their young children to participate saying that this would make them sad or they were not going to be capable of articulating their experiences as they were young.

Thirdly, great difficulties were met when trying to find typists to type Setswana transcripts. They were not willing to do so as they felt that typing Setswana was time-consuming as people tended to give very long accounts. They preferred not to type all that respondents said, feeling that some of it was repetition. But because I insisted that they should type everything, they refused to help. Those who agreed to help, changed their minds after typing one or two transcripts. As a result, I did most of the typing.

### ***Summary***

This chapter has discussed the methods and design that were used in the study. The next chapter presents findings of the study. It focuses on children's experiences before parental separation, and as such it is largely descriptive.



## CHAPTER 5

### Children's Experiences before Separation

#### *Introduction*

This chapter explores respondents' perceptions of children's experiences before the separation in order to outline significant experiences respondents identified that impacted upon how children adjusted to the divorce process. The study's main interest is in children's post-divorce experiences, so the chapter will only briefly discuss children's pre-separation experiences. The intention of the study was not to produce statistical associations between pre and post divorce experiences, but to identify trajectories and linkages as they were identified by respondents as well as to make comparisons in the meanings respondents attached to children's experiences.

The chapter focuses on experiences that respondents identified as significant during the pre-separation period. These were violence in the home, material circumstances and children's relationships with family and social network members. Since most children were exposed to violence in the home prior to divorce, and this was reported to be a major factor in their response to the separation, their perceptions of the effects of violence on them are explored in particular detail.

Other themes that featured in respondents' accounts of children's pre-separation experiences included children as active agents, resilience, as well as perceptions of how children fared emotionally and behaviourally prior to separation. These are also discussed in this chapter.

Findings presented in this chapter are derived from in-depth interviews with 25 mothers, one child of each of their children and in ten cases a sibling. Children and mothers' reports were in most cases consistent. I shall present a shared view of children's experiences, but will highlight differences where these occurred.

## ***The use of physical / corporal punishment and associated culture***

Violence in the family was a prominent experience in many families, so it is important first to consider wider attitudes towards it in Botswana. According to Setswana custom, moderate beating of wives is acceptable (Tabengwa and Fergus, 1998). The husband is regarded as the head of the family and the wife is seen as belonging to him and controlled by him. The husband can therefore chastise his wife as he can his children. This line of thinking parallels the feminist perspective's view that violence against women stems from the power and control men have over women and children.

Tabengwa and Fergus's contention that the Botswana society accepts men's right to exercise violence on women was also corroborated by the accounts of seven women in this study who sought help from customary courts regarding their husbands' violent behaviour. The women reported that customary court workers told them to go back to the marital homes and ensure that they did not do anything to provoke their husbands. The fact that moderate beating of wives is acceptable in Botswana shows that people live differently and the degree of violence that is acceptable in one society may not be accepted in another.

It should however be noted that it seems as if only courts that administer customary law permit the use of physical punishment on women. Customary laws are largely unwritten and based on beliefs and customs of particular tribes which are formulated by chiefs and other old males in the tribes (Armstrong, 1995). Other scholars (for example, Molokomme, 1987c: 129) define customary law as "traditional law that obtained before the Tswana tribes came into contact with European missionaries, traders, colonialists and other foreigners". Courts that administer the general law - i.e. laws received in Botswana during the period when the country was under British protection (Alexander et al, 1992: 28) disapprove of wife beating. This has been shown by Molokomme (1990: 34) when she quoted a court of appeal judge who presided over a case of wife beating " *...The law does not and will not recognise what is alleged to be an accepted custom in Botswana, that a husband may physically*



*assault his wife ....”*

The use of corporal punishment is not only acceptable on women, it is acceptable on children as well. According to Mannathoko, 1995, in Botswana, corporal punishment / physical violence (as some people call it) is considered a natural part of discipline and up bringing. Such punishment is widely used in both the private (family) and public (government schools and customary courts) spheres to ensure compliance with wishes and expectations of elders. Based on her experience as a teacher for several years in some Botswana schools, Mannathoko notes that although the Botswana education act of 1967 specifies conditions under which corporal punishment should be used in government schools, quite often schools do not adhere to the specified regulations. Mannathoko asserts that in schools, more male teachers than female ones use physical violence. This implies that it is generally more acceptable for men to use physical punishment on children because this is seen as part of the male role. Because the use of physical punishment is acceptable in Botswana, if parents have beaten their children, it is rare for children to report the fact to the police or social welfare organizations. This shows that wider social values and cultural practices influence people's reactions. It is in this context that we need to understand the children's experiences of violence in the family prior to the separation.

The background information on family violence in Botswana shows several patterns. 1) that the nature of children's experiences is greatly affected by the culture in which they grow up: 2) that both children and mothers are victims of a society that allows men to have power and control over women: 3) both children and mothers lack power.

### ***Children's experiences of violence in the family***

More than three quarters of the child respondents, i.e. 19 out of 25 children reported that they witnessed violence between their parents before separation. Some siblings and mothers confirmed the existence of violence in families. Only three children reported being exposed to parental violence after separation. Women who participated in this study were selected from a normal population of divorced people, not a clinical one, therefore the high number of those who experienced violence suggests that violence against women in Botswana is a serious problem. Divorce in

Botswana and in other African countries is not as common as in developed countries, so it is also possible that those who divorce are more extreme cases than in the west. Most respondents in the present study reported that they stayed in violent homes for between three and ten years. Six women and their children stayed for between eleven and 20 years, while one reported that she stayed for 31 years in a violent marriage. The finding that women stayed in violent homes for many years confirms that of Molokomme, 1990, who noted that most women tend to stay in violent relationships for a long time before they divorce. This has implications for the welfare of both children and mothers because existing literature from other countries as well as evidence from interviews with respondents in this study show that violence has adverse effects on people who experience it.

### The nature of the violence

Children reported that they witnessed their mothers being beaten and shouted at (i.e. physically and verbally abused). These types of violence were sometimes accompanied by emotional abuse. The most common form of violence that children witnessed was physical violence. The physical violence ranged from seeing their mothers being hit by their fathers with belts, fists, knives, axes or any kind of object their fathers came across, slapped, their hair being pulled, to fathers' attempts to set houses on fire with children and mothers inside. In all cases, fathers were perpetrators, though some mothers hit back in self-defense. Mothers revealed that because they never knew when the violence would start, it was difficult for them to prevent children from witnessing it.

Although mothers and children both acknowledged the existence of violence in the family, their reports of its frequency were different. Generally children reported that they witnessed violence much more frequently while mothers believed that children's exposure to violence was not frequent. The differences in children's and mothers' reports stem from several factors: 1) sometimes mothers were not aware that children were witnessing or hearing violence; 2) some of the violent episodes took place at night when children were thought to be sleeping. The children however pointed out that they were aware of the apparently hidden violence; 3) The differences may also arise from the fact that each family member can have different perceptions of the same phenomena / experience as the social construction approach suggests.



It should be noted that even when the abuse occurred infrequently, children vividly remembered it and reported that it caused distress to them. Katlego <sup>9</sup>, a 17-year-old girl, whose parents separated four years prior to the interview, said the following words when she described the nature of physical violence that took place in her family.

*My parents used to fight at night. I do not know why. I used to worry about the violence a lot. Everytime when I thought of the violence, I became sad.....Most of the time I did not see him beating her, but I heard my mother screaming. I saw him beating her sometimes....*

Kago, a boy aged 13, whose parents separated between one and two years prior to the interview said:

*It started when I was I think five years old. He used to beat my mother severely, especially when he was drunk. He used to hit her with any object. He liked to use his belt most of the time. We used to beg him to stop beating our mother, but he never listened. Sometimes he beat me as well. Sometimes my siblings and me screamed when we saw my mother being beaten. I was always worried about my mother. ....*

The above two accounts of violence are different in that Katlego largely heard her mother screaming and the quarrels, while Kago literally witnessed the violence most of the time. The accounts also vary in the sense that Kago took measures to try to stop his father from beating his mother, while Katlego did not. Kago's account that he intervened when his mother was beaten shows that he was an active rather than a passive agent regarding the violence that took place in his family. Both accounts show that the violence caused distress to children.

Seven out of nineteen children who witnessed violence vividly recalled incidents when the physical violence imposed on their mothers was severe and life threatening. Kamogelo, an 18 year old boy, whose parents separated three years prior to the interview described one occasion when his father inflicted extreme violence on his mother.

*.....he used a knife. His intention was to kill my mother. I was with my friends in the neighbourhood, and all of a sudden, I saw my mother running out of the house covered with blood. I could not believe my eyes. My mother was hospitalised in the intensive care unit for two weeks. During that time, I prayed a lot. I had never*

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<sup>9</sup> All children's names used in this thesis are pseudonyms.



*prayed before in my life. I prayed time and again to God to help my mother to recover. Before the extreme violence he inflicted on my mother, he used to beat her, but I never thought he could be so much violent to her. Indeed God answered my prayers. After she spent two weeks in the intensive care unit, she was moved to the general ward, and I knew that she was eventually going to recover.....*

Although it was mentioned earlier that some 'moderate beating' of women is acceptable under the Botswana culture, most children perceived some of the violent episodes that were inflicted on their mothers as unjustified. Children reported that some were severe and frequent, and that they did not know the causes of the violence. Two out of 19 children who witnessed violence against their mothers pointed out that the violence was justified because their fathers wanted their mothers to stop extra-marital affairs.

#### Children who were victims of violence

Not only did some children witness violence between parents; five from different families (3 boys and 2 girls) were victims themselves. Various scholars (cf. Bowker et al, 1990; Morley and Mullender, 1994) have found a link between violence towards women and child abuse. Bowker and colleagues assert that this link may be related to the power inequality between husband and wife as well as that between parents and children.

Although four of the five children who were victims of paternal violence had siblings, they said their siblings were not victims of violence. This view was supported by their mothers' accounts. One child used to incur physical injuries when trying to intervene to stop his father from beating his mother. In other words, he was caught in the violence that was directed towards his mother. Fathers usually directed the violence specifically towards the remaining four children. Violence that was inflicted on three children sometimes took place around the same time as that which was inflicted on their mothers. Tebogo, a 16 -year-old girl, whose parents were still staying together despite the fact that they had gone through a legal process of divorce three years prior to the interview said

*.....sometimes he hit my mother and me. When beating me, he used to tell me that he was preparing me for marriage so that when my future husband beats me, I should not leave him. He also used to say I am stupid just like my mother, and therefore I needed to be disciplined as well. The beatings sometimes left some wounds and scars on my body, and I could not go to school for several days because*



*I did not want my friends to see the wounds. One day he pulled my hair and I experienced a lot of pain. This was the day my mother and I decided that I should go and stay with my grandmother in the rural area .*

Tebogo's father's words that he beat Tebogo because he was preparing her for marriage so that when her future husband beats her, she does not leave him may have serious consequences for Tebogo in the long-term. She may internalise them such that when she is married, she can find it difficult to leave a violent relationship.

None of the five children in the study who felt that the physical violence imposed on them was severe reported to social service agencies. When asked why they did not seek help from such agencies, three children pointed said that their parents (especially fathers) had always administered corporal punishment to them from an early age, and that when they increased the severity of the corporal punishment, they accepted that they somehow deserved it. Two children pointed out that they did not know about the existence of child welfare agencies. When asked if they would have had reported if they had known, Kabelo, a 19 year-old boy, whose parents separated four years prior to the interview said:

*No, because my culture does not allow me to seek help without my parents' permission, so I could not have reported my father to such agencies even if I knew about them. If I could have done that, I could have disobeyed my parents, and my father was going to beat me even more.....*

Kabelo's words show how cultural factors can influence a child's responses to stressful situations. It also demonstrates that expectations are transmitted through networks collectively as social groups. Cultural expectations such as the above can have serious implications for children's welfare because children may end up dying at the hands of their parents.

From the above illustration, it is clear that violence is influenced by social factors. It also shows that whether violence is seen as abuse or not is socially constructed and these constructions reflect values and opinions of a particular culture at a particular time. Because of the newly established child welfare and women's advocacy organisations, which among other things make people aware that domestic violence and the use of corporal punishment on women and children is unacceptable, it is possible that society's perceptions of the practices may change in the long run.

Kitso, a girl aged 18, experienced sexual and physical abuse from her father. Both the girl and her mother felt uncomfortable about the use of a tape recorder, so their stories were not audiotaped. The two sadly revealed that the sexual abuse ended in pregnancy. According to Kitso, the sexual abuse took place for about three years and she did not reveal the abuse because her father threatened to kill her if she did so. The sexual abuse caused a lot of stress to the child, particularly since the perpetrator used threats and physical violence to isolate the child from having contact with her teenage friends contending that peers influenced her to do bad things.

### ***Perceived effects of witnessing violence on children***

Both children and mothers reported that the violence that children witnessed was emotionally disturbing for children. Children were able to provide detailed and vivid accounts of how the violence affected them both in the short and long-term while their mothers were not fully aware of the long term consequences that children suffered as a result of violence. Feelings that children associated with witnessing parental violence were intensely painful. They reported deep feelings of sadness, hostility, fear, low self-esteem and a few felt they had lost their childhood as a result of witnessing violence for many years. Mothers on the other hand generally assumed that children's emotional responses to the violence subsided or even disappeared immediately after the occurrence of the violent episodes and / or after their fathers' departure from the homes.

Mothers' lack of awareness of how seriously the violence had affected children partly stemmed from the fact that some of them were not aware in the first place that children had witnessed or even heard most violent exchanges. This was because violence in some families took place at night when parents thought children were sleeping. Below are some typical responses of mothers when asked how they thought the violence had affected their children

*I don't know how the violence affected her feelings, I just know that she does not want to have any contact with her father.....She continued to perform well in school, so I really don't know how the violence affected her, she will tell you....*

*I think her feelings were affected when she saw the violence, but now she feels okay because she no longer sees it.*



*Children do not want to see parents fighting, so I believe his feelings were affected, but I really don't know how. He is the one who can explain in detail.*

An analysis of children's accounts show that parental violence affected children differently. The perceived effects of violence on children depended on their constructions of its causes and meanings, their perceptions of its frequency and its intensity, their perceptions of their relationships with fathers as well as passage of time. Generally, children who perceived violence as stemming from their mothers' behaviour (two) reported that they were less affected by it, than their counterparts (the majority) who did not associate the violence with their mothers' behaviour, and those who did not know its causes. Because most children fell in the former two groups, this implies that violence adversely affected a large number of children in the study. Similarly, children who perceived the violence as frequent and severe reported that it affected them greatly. This finding parallels that of Cummings and colleagues (1981).

Children (both female and male) who witnessed violence for many years, as well as those who perceived the violence that was inflicted on their mothers as intense, interpreted the violence as a sign that their fathers hated their mothers and therefore wanted to hurt them physically and / or to kill them. They believed their mothers did not deserve the violence. This interpretation that children gave to violence made them feel angry with their fathers and hate them. Feelings of hostility occupied children's minds for a long time. Most children (with a few exceptions) at the time of the interview still felt the same way towards their fathers as they felt during the period when violence was prevalent in their families. This shows that negative emotions that stem from witnessing violence can be long lasting. Below are accounts of some of those children.

*Interviewer: What did the violence mean to you?*

*Katlego, girl aged 17 whose experience of parental violence was 4 years prior to the time of the interview: To me, it meant that he hated my mother. I hated him as well.*

*Interviewer: Do you still feel the same way towards him or your feelings have changed?*

*Katlego: I don't think my feelings will change. I witnessed the violence since I was young so I don't believe my feelings towards my father will change.*



*Interviewer: Does anybody know about how you feel towards your father?*

*Katlego: No, I have not told anyone. I know that people can be surprised to hear a child saying she hates her father. I also know that if I tell somebody and my father ends up knowing that I hate him, I will be in trouble....*

Feelings of anger among children who witness violence between people are well documented in the family violence literature (cf. Cummings et al, 1985). The above quotes show that some children's feelings about the effects of parental violence on them did not change with time. They also show that generally children concealed their anger that was related to witnessing parental violence. They justified their actions of non-disclosure by their beliefs that it was taboo to talk about violence in the home. This belief partly stemmed from the fact that they never heard their family members talking about the violence in the first place. Therefore, they perceived their families' attitudes to talking to outsiders about family problems as negative. They learned from the family's verbal and non-verbal cues that certain issues should not be discussed, therefore they kept worries to themselves. Although children concealed their feelings, they viewed it as not effective in helping them to cope because the thoughts / emotions about the violence preoccupied their minds and made them distressed.

The fights and abuse that were prevalent in children's homes were hidden from the outside, as shown by the following words of Andrew, an 18-year-old boy.

*The only person that I talked to about violence is my brother, but we were whispering and afraid that our parents may hear us. We never talked about it in the family, I mean even with my mother. This made me believe that it is something that people should not talk about. Again, I never heard anyone outside the family, or other children talking about it.....*

The above quote shows that Andrew felt that something was wrong, but the message he received from parents was that things were fine, and were not to be discussed. The non-disclosure of experiences of family violence can have serious implications for the emotional well being of children because it 'blocks the child's ability to process the upheaval and the imminent danger associated with it' (Eisikovits et al, 1998: 556).

In some families, siblings had similar perceptions, but in others, they did not. The different perceptions stemmed from the various relationships siblings had with fathers prior to separation. For example, Daisy, a girl aged 14 disliked her father and



attributed this to the favourable treatment he gave to her brother. Daisy's brother, aged 10, on the other hand saw his father's violence as minor.

*.....after he beat my mother he was always nice to me. And he was always nice to me all the time. He always went with me in his car and bought me nice things. ....So this made me not to hate my father .....*

In contrast, Lizzy aged 16 and her sister aged 14 had similar views. They both viewed their pre-separation relationships with fathers as poor. Therefore, they held similar feelings about how violence affected them as shown below.

*When I saw my father beating my mother, I felt very angry and bitter towards him. I still feel the same way towards him now, and every time I see him, I think of the violent episodes. I will never forgive him for inflicting so much violence on my mother (Lizzy whose experience of violence in the home was a year prior to the interview)*

*Lizzy's sister: My dad liked to hit my mother. It made me very sad. I used to cry a lot. I did not like my dad....*

*Interviewer: What is your attitude towards your dad now that he no longer beats your mother:*

*Lizzy's sister: What do you mean?*

*Interviewer: I mean do you still not like your dad now or your thoughts have changed.?*

*Lizzy's sister: Yes, I still don't like him. He made my mother suffer.....*

Staying in violent families not only provoked feelings of anger among some children, it also influenced their perceptions of their families. Children perceived their homes as unsafe places and lived in fear and insecurity. When asked how they felt during an abusive incident, most children said they were afraid or worried. This finding supports that of Ericksen and Henderson (1992) as well as that of Peled (1998). Children's (both girls and boys) fears and feelings of insecurity stemmed from several factors. Firstly, they believed that violence against their mothers was likely to be followed by violence directed against themselves. Both the actual and potential violence created an environment in which the expectation of violence and the subsequent terror was a daily reality for children (Eisikovits et al, 1998).

Secondly, children feared that their mothers would be severely hurt or even die

because of the violence.

*I feared that one-day, he will beat all of us (the children). I also feared that my mother might die at any time, and then we would be left without parents. I did not consider him as my parent because he was cruel to my mother. I always prayed that God can help my mother to live longer..... (Mercy, girl aged 16 whose parents separated between 3 and 4 years prior to the interview)*

*I was scared that one day my father will hold my mother too tightly by the neck and my mother would die, leaving us young. I worried that if my mother died, we would have no one to look after us. (Joseph, 13 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview).*

Feelings of fear that children reported were sometimes coupled with feelings of helplessness and depression.

*.....I remember on several occasions when the violence imposed on my mother was extreme, I tried to stop him from continuing. I got injured on two occasions, and I felt very depressed about it. I also felt helpless that I was not able to help my mother... (Antony, 19 whose experience of parental separation was 4 years prior to the interview)*

Thirdly, children feared that other children in the neighbourhood would know about the violence that took place in their families and would spread the news at school, and as a result they would feel embarrassed. Worries about other children learning about the violence are well founded because people usually want their families to be perceived as normal, even if they are aware that they are not. Children in particular prefer to be accepted by friends, rather than isolated or stigmatised as shown by the following exchange between the interviewer and Thato, a 17 year old girl, whose experience of parental physical separation was 3 years prior to the interview.

*Interviewer: Earlier you said the violence made you worried, could you tell me what exactly you were worried about?*

*Thato: I was worried because sometimes when my father beat my mother severely, my mother screamed so loudly that neighbours would hear her screams. I remember one day one of our neighbours came to try to help my mother, and my father beat him as well. So I was very worried that children in the neighbourhood would know about what was happening in my family and then laugh at me.....*

Fourthly, girls, rather than boys expressed fears and concerns that when they are adults, their marital relations would be characterised by violence, just like their mothers', therefore gender related domination would persist. For these girls, life in a



violent home was the only reality they knew, therefore their fears should be understood in this context. Kagiso, a girl aged 21 whose parents had separated 4 years earlier for example said:

*.....Sometimes I worried and feared that when I am an adult, the man who marries me is going to beat me.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that.*

*Kagiso: Because when I grew up, I always saw my father hitting my mother and not talking to her nicely.....*

Children's exposure to parental violence is quite often not an isolated experience, but is embedded within other experiences that are stressful to children such as a low level of family living and poor family relationships. This was the case for several children in the study. Kabelo, aged 19, for example, perceived his relationship with both his parents as well as with his siblings as not close. The only person he viewed as close to him was his grandmother, with whom unfortunately he did not have much contact as she lived in a different country. He reported that all the above experiences as well as witnessing parental violence, and being a victim of it, created intense feelings of depression in him.

*It was terrible seeing my parents fighting. I felt very depressed. None of them loved me, they loved my siblings only..... fights to me meant that they did not love each other either. Life in my family was terrible. No one in the family had a good relationship with me. I sometimes felt like committing suicide..(Child cried).....The only person whom I believe loves me is my grandma, but I only see her once in a while as she stays outside Botswana.....*

### **Effects of being victims of violence on children**

Although both girls (2) and boys (3) in five families were victims of parental violence, girls accounts of the effects of violence on them indicate that they believed the effects were much more traumatic on them than on boys. The two older girls in the study who were both victims and witnesses of parental violence reported that the violence that was inflicted on them made them feel they had lost their childhood and that it would be difficult to recover it. The emotional, verbal and physical abuse to which children were exposed usually started early in the couple's relationship, and was the only family reality that some children recognised. For these children, the



effects of violence were so severe that they were not able to gain distance from it. They reported that non-violent periods were just as traumatic as periods when the violence took place. Their minds were time and again preoccupied with thoughts of the violence and this made their childhood years traumatic. These children perceived their experiences of childhood as different from those of other children they knew and resented this a lot. They also believed that their experiences of violence affected their self-esteem and had ruined their lives as shown by the following words of Tebogo whose parents were divorced, but were still staying together.

*I never enjoyed my life when I was a child. Since I was young, I have been seeing them fighting. I mean my father beating my mother. He liked to hit me as well, I don't know why. Now I stay with grandma, but when I visit my mother during school holidays, he sometimes bits me. I am always thinking about the violence even during the time when it is not taking place and I feel sad that I can't stay with my mother because my father beats me. I don't want to bring friends home like other children because I don't want them to know that my father sometimes beats us. .... What makes me very sad is that even when my mother runs away from the home, my father follows her up and forces her to come back and continues to hit her.... (Child cried). (Pause) I was even surprised when you told me that your study is about children of divorced parents. I don't know my parents are divorced because they are still staying together.*

The following exchange between the interviewer and Kitso, a girl aged 18 who was also a victim of violence shows how she felt the violence affected her as a girl child.

*Interviewer: We have talked at length about how your father used to beat your mother and how you felt about it. Could you now tell me about how the violence that was inflicted on you made you feel?*

*Kitso: I usually do not talk about it, but I will tell you because I have already told you about other things that happened in my family and I believe you will not tell any one.*

*Interviewer: No, I won't.*

*Kitso: The beatings as well as the sexual abuse that I experienced made me feel terrible. I have not talked about this to anyone except my mother. I felt worthless. I hated myself. (Child cried). I still feel the same way now. I keep thinking of the bad things I experienced and I just feel terrible. I never talk about them because I hope I will forget as time goes on, but I am not able to forget, I don't know why. Sometimes when I look at my child, I feel very angry at my father because he destroyed my future. He has destroyed my life. I did not enjoy my childhood years because he used to beat my mother even when I was young, and after I grew up, he started to beat me and to sleep with me. .... (Child cried) (pause) He made me pregnant and is not supporting the child.....*



Both Tebogo and Kitso's accounts show that they perceived the effects of violence on them as severe. Previous research (cf. Dobash, 1977) has shown that the female child seems most likely to become the second victim of the battering man / father. Therefore, it is not surprising that the two girls who were victims of violence believed the effects of violence on them were not only traumatic, but also long-term. The effects of violence on the girl child can be made more traumatic because sometimes the violence imposed on them not only involves physical, emotional and verbal abuse, but also sexual abuse and pregnancy, as in Kitso's case. The effects are made more complex by the fact that the sexual abuse resulted in the child falling pregnant, - ( having a baby, the product which may be a constant reminder to Kitso of the abuse she went through) and the father is not supporting either the child's mother or the child itself. All these dynamics can make life for a teenager complex and miserable for many years. However when Kitso was asked if she was interested in attending counselling sessions, she said no, on the basis that she believes the more she talks about her experiences, the more difficult it will be for her to forget them.

Only one boy (an older adolescent aged 19) associated his experience of parental violence as well as other family stressful circumstances with feelings of lost childhood. The other two boys- aged 10 and 13 who were victims of violence did not associate their experience with feelings of lost childhood and long-term effects. They associated it with feelings of sadness. One reason for the differences in accounts of younger and older children might be that younger children have a more limited vocabulary than older ones to explicitly assert their experiences and accounts.

### Children who did not experience violence

Not all children were exposed to violence in the family. Six mothers and their children reported that there was no violence in their families. Such families were not homogeneous. Three of the women who did not experience violence did not stay with their husbands full-time prior to the marital rupture because of their husbands' employment demands. The other two stayed with their husbands full-time before separation, but their husbands left the marital homes peacefully to cohabit with other women, while the sixth woman was studying abroad when her husband decided to leave the marital home permanently.

## ***Material circumstances***

In this section, I explore respondents' perceptions of children's material circumstances prior to the separation. These perceptions are largely explored in relation to fathers' roles as financial providers for families. An analysis of children's and mothers' accounts showed that there were three groups of families in this study. The first group was composed of children whose fathers were described as having made contributions to families' financial stability throughout the pre-divorce period (about half of the children in the study). The second group was composed of children whose fathers reduced the amount of support after the families experienced marital problems (ten). And the third group was composed of children who had never received financial support from fathers and other people compensated for fathers' non contribution (three).

Although the economic hardships were experienced by families which had unemployed mothers as well as those with employed mothers, they were more severe for the former, as they were largely dependent on their husbands' wages. Economic hardships experienced by families with working mothers could be linked to the fact that the earning capacity of most men in Botswana is higher than that of women. In addition, more males than females have attained higher levels of education and therefore hold better paid jobs (see chapter one for national figures on education levels of men and women in Botswana). These gender economic inequalities that exist during the pre-separation period often results in women and children experiencing economic hardship when men stop supporting them. The inequalities not only prevail in Botswana, but in many other countries as well.

Lack of financial support from fathers is not the only reason that caused children to experience economic hardship before the legal divorce. Mothers reported that children also experienced economic hardship because they had to pay high legal fees in connection with the divorce, despite the fact that they earned low incomes. Such mothers reported that they did not know of legal agencies that helped low-income women until the time of the interview. Children made no reference to the high legal fees that their mothers paid.

## ***Children's relationships with family and wider social network***



## **members**

This section focuses on children's relationships with family and social network members prior to the separation. This study largely focused on children's relationships with their individual network members, rather than on their relations with collective features of their networks.

### **The influence of rural-urban migration on children's relationships with relatives**

All children who participated in this study lived with their biological parents prior to the separation. None stayed full-time with extended family members. About three-quarters of families in this study were separated geographically from most of their kin members. The parents had moved to the city leaving behind most relatives in the home villages. Only seven families lived in the same villages in which a majority of their kin lived.

One process that was found to shape children's contact and overall relationships with relatives is rural-urban migration, which results in the working age population migrating to towns for employment leaving elderly relatives in rural areas. In traditional Botswana (prior to urbanisation), members of a family (both nuclear and extended) lived together in one village and were in most cases available to provide support to each other in times of need (Molokomme, 1987c). Migration from rural to urban areas has resulted in infrequent contacts between kin members, which tend to lower kinship solidarity (Peil and Sada, 1984). A study on family care giving in Botswana conducted by Shaibu (1997) showed that very few elderly people lived with their grandchildren because most parents preferred to stay with their children. This preference can be partly attributed to the fact that parents want their children to have access to better facilities (education, health, recreation, etc) in towns. As such kin were not only distant from children geographically, but were also in very different social, economic and cultural contexts.

## Children's relationships with family members

### *Relationships between children and fathers*

#### **Children who perceived their relations with fathers as negative**

One third of children in the study perceived their pre-separation relationships with their fathers as poor. Children in this group were the five who were victims of parental violence as well as a few who witnessed it. They pointed out that as much as their fathers did not like them, they did not like them either.

One common theme among children who viewed their relationships with fathers in negative terms prior to separation was poor communication. In other words, children's relations with such fathers were characterised by rigid boundaries and there was no open communication. According to children and mothers, the fathers believed in top-down communication with children. This was evidenced by the words of Grace below.

*....We feared him, he liked to talk to us angrily, as he did to mum. He never listened to us...(Grace, aged 21)*

#### **Children who perceived their relations with fathers as close**

Despite the negative relationships, which some children had with fathers, another third of children in the study perceived their relationship with their fathers as okay or 'good' throughout the pre-separation period. Fathers provided emotional, recreational, material and financial support to children. For these children, there was greater pre-post separation continuity than others.

Children who viewed their relationships with fathers as close prior to divorce were not a homogenous group. They were of various ages and gender and had experienced parental separation between one and four years prior to the interview. Only two whose fathers were violent prior to separation viewed their relations with them as close. The other children who viewed their relations with fathers as close prior to separation did not live in violent homes. One common theme among children who said they had close relationships with fathers is that of good communication. Unlike their counterparts who said their relations with fathers were poor and that fathers had a tendency to speak to the angrily, children who had close relations with fathers did



not hold that view. Instead, they reported that fathers talked to them nicely most of the time.

Although there were differences in children's accounts (i.e. those who had close relationships with fathers and those who did not) of the way their fathers talked to them, one similarity among their accounts was that they pointed out that they were not free to discuss emotionally sensitive issues with fathers. In response to the question 'when your parents were still staying together, whom did you turn to first most of the time to discuss issues that worried you?', almost all children mentioned friends, mothers and grandmothers.

Some discrepancies were noted in siblings' perspectives on relationships with their fathers before divorce. For example, out of the ten children whose siblings participated in the study, six perceived their relations with fathers as positive and four did not. The following words of Peter, a 12-year-old boy, whose parents separated between one and two years prior to the interview, show how his relationship with his father was before the separation.

*..... my father worked in a different town, my siblings, my mother and myself stayed in the village. He used to visit us twice a month, sometimes more than twice, and I used to go with him to the cattle-post. We used to play football together.... I used to visit him during most weekends and school holidays. My siblings used to be jealous that I got along well with my father. They hated me saying that my father loved me more than he loved them because he bought me a lot of things and spent most time with me.....*

When asked how he felt about the way his father treated him and the way he treated his siblings, he said:

*I did not like it. I wanted him to treat me the same as he treated my siblings, not to give me special treatment. I felt bad when my siblings hated me. It made me worried and unhappy.....*

Although it looks as if Peter's father believed he was doing the right thing by treating children differently, Peter felt uncomfortable about it. He perceived his father's actions as not fair and wished his father could treat all children equally, particularly since he was aware that his siblings did not like to be discriminated against. Peter's perceptions towards the way that his father treated him and his siblings show that he was not a passive subject of socialisation, but was actively involved in contributing

to his knowledge and development. His story shows how close a child's relationship with a father can be, despite the fact that the two did not stay together on a full-time basis. It also shows that children's relationships with fathers may differ from one sibling to another partly because of the way fathers treat each sibling.

The finding that some children had different relations with fathers necessitates a closer examination of factors that might have led to parental differential treatment. Although fathers (the perpetrators of such treatment) were not interviewed, some insights could be drawn from mothers' and children's accounts. Factors such as age as well as whether the father was the biological parent to a child influenced how fathers treated children. For example, younger children (except in one family) were treated more favourably and fathers treated their biological children better than other children.

#### **Children who perceived their relations with fathers as mixed / neutral**

The remaining third of children perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers in neutral terms. They said the relations were neither good nor bad. These were largely children who witnessed parental violence, and believed that their fathers loved them. Children in this group reported that they benefited from staying with fathers as fathers provided various kinds of social support to them, but their stay with fathers also created distress for them. They had contradictory feelings about their fathers' violent actions towards their mothers and their 'nice' behaviour towards them.

Like accounts of their counterparts who viewed their relationships with fathers as close and those who viewed them as not close, accounts of children in this group indicated that the nature of communication between them and their fathers was of a 'top-down' nature. They also reported that they were free to talk about certain issues with fathers, but not about others. Topics they felt comfortable to discuss with fathers included sports and schoolwork. While those they were not free to discuss included the family and private matters such as violence that was prevalent in their homes.

#### **Fathers' roles and lifestyles during the pre-separation period**

Prior to separation, almost all fathers played the roles of disciplining children and providing families with financial support. Several fathers also acted as mediators in



cases where they felt mothers were not treating children fairly. They also provided recreational support to children by engaging them in fun activities.

### *Relationships between children and mothers*

Before discussing children's relationships with mothers, it is important to note certain cultural aspects of relationships between children and mothers in Botswana. There as probably in nearly all other countries, mothers are the primary carers of children. One factor that accounts for mothers playing a more vital role in childcare and rearing than fathers in Botswana is differences in the socialisation of boys and girls. From an early age boys are allowed to spend much more time with their peers outside the home and to hang around in public places while girls are more confined to the home doing household chores such as taking care of children and cooking. The huge amount of housework and childcare (which is apparently unpaid) that women perform limits their ability to engage in paid and valued work. This according to feminists is unfair and perpetuates male dominance on women.

A study conducted by Nyati-Ramahobo (1996) in Botswana showed that the daily activities for Botswana boys in the cities differ from those of girls. The following are some of the activities which boys typically engage in: watching TV; reading newspapers, going to movies and other public places and washing family cars. Girls, on the other hand, cook, sweep yards, do laundry and take care of young children. The above list shows that girls' activities center on the home, while those of boys largely center outside the home. Ramahobo found that the type of activities which boys perform to a large extent influences the activities they perform later as men. It is generally acceptable for men to spend much more time outside the home than women. The fact that women spend more time in the home with children may result in children being closer to their mothers than to their fathers or children and mothers experiencing frequent conflicts because they are likely to be more aware of each other's shortcomings. It should be noted that not all men in Botswana spend less time with children, since some perform as much or even more childcare than women.

### **Children who perceived their relationships with mothers in positive terms**

A majority of children in the study viewed their pre-separation relationships with mothers as okay. They reported that their relationships with mothers were neither good nor bad. When asked which parent they were closest to prior to the separation,



most children said they were 'closest' to their mothers than to their fathers. More girls than boys reported that their mothers were important sources of emotional support.

### **Children who perceived their relations with mothers in negative terms**

A few teenagers and their mothers perceived their relationships as negative. One factor that accounted for such relationships according to the mothers was the marital problems they were going through. Literature from other countries (cf. Longfellow et al, 1982; Sheppard, 1997) also shows that mothering under stress negatively affects mother-child relationships. Some mothers pointed out that because they used to be depressed as a result of the violence, economic hardship, and their ex-husbands' continued absence from the marital homes, they had difficulties in dealing with their children. They reported that they were often short tempered when interacting with children and tended to use corporal punishment and speak angrily to children as a way of disciplining them. Hence the mothers became the targets of their children's resentment even though the fathers' actions contributed significantly to the problem.

Two children (a boy and a girl) reported that they could not recall any positive aspects of their relationship with their mothers throughout their childhood years. Both children were the eldest in families, so it seems like birth-order played a role in the mother-child relationship. The children pointed out that their relationship with mothers had all along been largely characterised by negative encounters. The poor relationships had a long history and were perceived as very stressful by children. The following narrative of Kabelo, a 19-year-old boy, who participated in the study depicts how his relationship with her mother was during the many years of his childhood.

*..... when I was young, I did not stay with my parents. I have four siblings and all of them stayed with my parents, it was only myself who was sent to stay with relatives. I do not know why. When I was doing standard 3, I began to stay with my parents, but within a short period of time, I realised that they (especially my mother) were not treating me like they treated other children. Although my father used to beat me, he did not do it as frequently as my mother did, because he spent most of the time outside the home. I remember one day, my sister had deliberately made me to fall down from a chair on my head, I experienced a lot of pain, and cried thinking that one of my parents would come to intervene. None of them however disciplined my sister for having hurt me, so I took action. I ran after her and threw a stone at her. Unfortunately the stone hit a very old car which had been parked for ages because it*



*was not working. We used to play on it because no one used it. The window of the car got broken, and my father beat me severely for breaking the window.*

*My mother used to talk to me angrily and beat me many times. My childhood years were terrible. Every time when something went wrong in the family, my mother verbally and sometimes physically abused me. I was blamed for all the wrong things in the family. One day I tried to commit suicide because I realised that no one in the family loved me, but I was not successful. The following day, she called her relatives who were very angry with me for having attempted suicide. They told me that no one in the history of their families has attempted suicide, and therefore I should never do that again. They did not sit down with me to listen to reasons why I tried to commit suicide, but just got angry with me. I felt devastated. I thought of making another suicide attempt, but I asked myself what would happen if I do not succeed again. I learned from the way my mother's relatives were angry at me that as a Motswana child, I am not supposed to express my feelings or indicate to people that I need help because no one will listen sympathetically, but they will ridicule and blame me for doing so. After the day I attempted suicide, every time when my mother verbally abused me, she would say I tried to commit suicide because I believe people do not love me and she will never stop abusing me until I behave well. Those words used to cause a lot of pain to me, especially that I was the only child who was always abused. I did not know what I was doing that made my mother to say I did not behave well. I felt terrible. (child cried...) I sometimes wished that I could die because people hated me. I was always depressed, at home and at school. I performed badly at school. The teacher always told us that if we tried harder, we would pass. But I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I was not going to make it. My mother always told me that I would never pass at school, because I am stupid, so I believed it. My parents are divorced now, and I am living with my mother, my siblings and my mother's boyfriend, but life is not better either. My mother still treats me differently from other children in the family.....*

The above narrative shows how a child's relationship with a mother can be negative over a long period. It looks as if the attachment between the mother and the child from an early age never existed. It further shows how children in the same family can have different relationships with their mothers as well as the different consequences that children can experience. While some children's relationships with mothers initially can be positive, they can change as time goes on, but for the above child, he never had a positive relationship with his mother. This pained the child a lot particularly because he did not know the root cause of his mother's behavior and attitude towards him. Feelings of low self-esteem and lack of trust in other people developed in the child as a result of the emotional, verbal and physical abuse, which he was going through. The negative relationship, which the child had with his mother, has serious implications for the well-being of the child, particularly as the mother has been and is still the sole carer for the child.



## **Mothers' roles and lifestyles**

Several mothers (ten) were homemakers before separation. They played a more significant role in providing children with instrumental and companionship support. Most mothers in the study pointed out that their role in disciplining children during the pre-separation period was minimal, as fathers largely performed it in the customary way. Only a few reported playing a more significant role than the father in disciplining children prior to separation, usually as a result of fathers' irregular presence from the homes.

*Because her father was spending very little time in the home if not any, I think Mercy believed that there was no one who could beat her if she misbehaved. So she started snicking out of the house at night. I told her father, and he told me to beat her. I told him that I don't know how to beat a child, and he just said I have to learn to do it because he is no longer going to beat children he is not staying with..... I had no choice, and started to beat her. This made my relationships with her to be poor as she was only used to being beaten by her father only, not by me.*

The above mother's assertion that she was not accustomed to using corporal punishment is understandable because corporal punishment on children as noted elsewhere in this chapter is largely used by men in Botswana. It is therefore not surprising that the woman's use of corporal punishment adversely affected her relationship with her daughter.

## **Communication and boundaries**

An analysis of respondents' accounts showed that in most families communication was not open. Children who said they were closer to mothers than to fathers viewed communication between them and mothers as 'just okay'. When asked what they meant, one common explanation they gave was that they felt free to talk about certain issues but not others with mothers. A closer analysis of children's accounts showed that the nature of their communication with mothers was characterised by a top-down approach just like that between them and fathers. Although several children said they usually turned first to mothers to discuss things that worried them, they also mentioned that they were often selective on the topics they discussed with mothers. They pointed out that they did not talk to mothers about issues that they felt might make their mothers angry or uncomfortable, but instead they either talked to friends and / or grandmothers.



### *Relationships with siblings*

All of the children but one interviewed stayed with their siblings prior to the separation. Siblings were sometimes supportive to each other, while sometimes they added stress to each other. Existing literature on siblings consistently points to both the competitive and conflictual nature of sibling relationships, but also the capacity for companionship, affection and intimacy (Bryant, 1992).

Cultural practices influenced financial and material support which siblings provided for each other. In Botswana and probably other African countries, older employed siblings, especially those from low-income families, are expected to contribute financially to their families of origin. The few children who had older working siblings who participated in this study reported that although their working siblings had always helped them both materially and financially, they increased the help after they realised that their fathers had financially neglected the families. Older siblings also played an important role in their younger siblings' education. Mothers who were illiterate appreciated the help that older siblings provided for younger ones regarding the supervision and monitoring of school and homework.

In addition to the provision of material and educational support to younger siblings, some older siblings also provided them with recreational, emotional and companionship support. Some children reported that they used to discuss their feelings and fears regarding the unhappy family lives with their older siblings and that older siblings consoled them. Siblings provided company for each other both at home and when they were going to and coming back from school.

Siblings' relationships do not take place in a vacuum, but are embedded within the context of relationships with other family members. Six out of the ten siblings who participated in the study reported that their relations with siblings were not close largely because of differences in the way their fathers treated them. They reported that their fathers favoured one or more of their sisters and brothers more than them and this made them to be jealous. In addition, some siblings who were favoured tended to look down upon those who were not. Aron's sibling, a boy aged 16, had this to say about his relationship with Aron.

*My younger brother spoke good English because they speak it at school. He was attending an English Medium School and I was not. So I was not able to speak*



*English like him. He believes he is cleverer than me. He liked to talk to me in English and when I responded in Setswana, he laughed at me and went around telling people that although I am older than him, I do not know English. This pained me a lot because I did not choose to attend a Tswana Medium School, but my father just decided not to enrol me in it. I don't know why. My mother earned low wages, so I knew that she could not afford to pay school fees for me....*

## Children's relationships with wider social network members

### *Maternal grandparents*

In this section, I explore children's relations with relatives. Not all children had living maternal grandmothers. Similarly, not all children's maternal grandmothers played a positive role in their lives prior to the separation. Out of the 25 children who participated in this study, 21 had maternal grandmothers alive and four children's grandmothers were dead. Similarly, not all grandmothers had husbands, only ten out of 21 had husbands. Some grandmothers' were either never married, divorced or their husbands had passed away. The high number of maternal grandmothers who were alive in this study compared to grandfathers may be partly a result of the low life expectancy of males compared to that of females in Botswana. According to the United Nations data (1995) between 1990 and 1995, the life expectancy at birth for males in Botswana was 60, while for females it was 66.

A majority of mothers and children perceived children's relationships with maternal relatives as positive prior to the divorce. However, they revealed that children had more contact with maternal than paternal relatives. This was so despite the fact that some of them did not live in the same town or village. The frequent contacts that children had with maternal relatives were more common among families with young children who could not be left on their own, or with older siblings. Because mothers mainly take care of children, they reported that they felt more comfortable in requesting their own relatives to help in child care as well as to look after sick children (both old and young), than their in-laws. This finding is similar to that of Hill (1987) who studied a sample of families in Edinburgh.

Although most children and mothers mentioned maternal grandmothers as relatives who had the most positive relationships with children, children's contact with them was limited partly because of the long distances between where children lived and where grandmothers lived. The distance between the towns and or villages where 13



of the 25 children who participated in the study lived and the villages where their grandmothers lived was more than 200 kilometers. Such children therefore, did not have much face to face contact with their maternal grandparents. This shows that migration has affected children's contact not only with grandparents, but with their other relatives who live in rural areas. Findings from Britain (cf. Hill, 1987) which shows that grandparents have frequent contact with children may therefore mean that British children have more contact with grandmothers than children who participated in this study. This may be the case partly because grandparents can perhaps afford to travel long distances because of the small size of the country, the relatively good condition of roads, the free time they have (compared with those in Botswana who are likely to engage in agricultural activities in rural areas) as well as the resources they have. A further reason that may account for the more frequent contact between children and grandmothers in the Scottish study is that the children were much younger than those in the present study.

Besides the long distances between children and grandmothers, children who lived in towns also had less contact with grandmothers in distant rural areas because most were not interested in the lifestyle of rural areas. Even during school holidays, they preferred to stay in the towns. As noted earlier in this chapter, some children's relatives who lived in rural areas were of low economic status and as such, their lifestyles were different from that of the children. This discrepancy made some children (both girls and boys) lose interest in rural life as shown by the words of Moemedi, a 12-year-old boy, below:

*.....there is no TV and electricity in Paje, and that is why I don't like it there...I also don't like fetching water from the stand-pipe...*

Similarly, grandparents were not keen to spend much time in towns as they tended to miss the rural life. For most elderly people in Botswana, rural life is part of them, and if they are uprooted to urban areas, they do not feel comfortable. The few children in this study who lived in the same rural areas as their grandparents before separation had more frequent and prolonged contact with them than their counterparts who lived in urban areas.

The amount of time that children spent with their grandmothers was further influenced by the fact that most grandmothers came to towns for short visits for the



following reasons: to take care of sick children; when their daughters or granddaughters had recently given birth to help in child care; when their daughters did not have domestic workers ( especially taking into account the high turnover of domestic workers which some families experienced); and when the grandparents themselves were sick and needed better medical attention.

Despite the reported brief time that children spent with grandparents, once in a while, when children and grandmothers met, their interactions were reciprocal and supportive. Grandmothers provided children with informational and emotional support on issues that worried them, such as violence and economic problems. However, their ability to play a prominent role in providing children with these kinds of support was hampered by the infrequent contact between them and children.

Children (especially older girls) on the other hand provided services to grandparents. This demonstrates that some relationships between children and grandmothers were characterised by reciprocity. The finding that older girls' relations with grandmothers were reciprocal is not surprising taking into account the gender differences that exist in the socialization process that have been highlighted earlier in the chapter. The reciprocal nature of relations that some girls had with their grandmothers was evidenced by the following conversation between the interviewer and Grace, aged 21.

*Interviewer: You said you liked your grandma very much. Could you tell me what you liked about her?*

*Grace: When life was bad in the family before my dad and mum stopped staying together, she used to come to town for medical check up, sometimes she just came to see us. Because my mother had always not talked to me about why she and daddy liked to fight, I talked to my grandma. I told her that I felt sad about the violence that used to take place in the home and that my mother does not buy food for us, and that she likes to be serious even when we try to joke with her. My grandma was sympathetic to my story and she talked to my mother about it. After a few days, things became better in the family. I mean although the violence continued, my mother began to buy food, and she showed more interest in us than before.*

*Interviewer: Do you remember anything you used to do for her?*

*Grace: Yes, many things, like washing her clothes and cooking. I also enjoyed taking her for a walk because she was blind.*

Most grandmothers provided little financial and material support to children because both they and the children were dependent on the children's parents for economic



survival.

One mother reported that her children's relationship with her grandmother changed from being supportive to 'just neutral' a few months before the separation. When asked why the relationship changed, the mother said:

*It was because my mother did not want me to leave the violent marriage. She had always advised me to keep trying to please my ex-husband so that he does not beat me. About two months before I ran away from the marital home, I told her that I will leave the marital home any time, as I could no longer stand the violence. She told me that if I do so, she would not provide me with accommodation. During those two months, when my children visited her, she did not show much interest in them. They then told me that my mother does not seem to be happy when they are around, and I told them to stop visiting her.....*

Some of the few maternal grandfathers who were alive occasionally provided financial support to children and their mothers, but otherwise children rarely mentioned them.

### *Paternal grandparents*

Unlike most children's contact with maternal relatives that was said to be more frequent, their contact with paternal ones was reported to be less frequent. A few children (six) reported that their paternal grandmothers played the same roles that were played by maternal ones and that they had close relationships with them. Sibling differences were noted again on this issue. For example, two children from different families who felt discriminated against by their fathers because the fathers said they were not their biological children felt that their paternal relatives also discriminated against them. Their mothers' corroborated their accounts.

*..... It is a problem in this culture for a woman to enter marriage with children who don't belong to the man....As I told, I had two children before I got married, and that man although he said he will treat them as his own, he did not. His relatives were even worse than him on the way they treated my children.....*

Here, we see the double discrimination that children born out of wedlock can experience.

Besides the long distance between children and some paternal relatives, children's relationships with paternal relatives were partly influenced by their mothers' relationships with such relatives. For example, if the mother's relationship with her



in-laws was poor, children had less contact or none at all with paternal relatives and vice-versa. This finding was based on mothers' accounts only. In elaborating how her poor relationship with in laws led to children having less contact with them if any, one woman said:

*My mother in law has never played any positive role in the lives of my children both during the time of the marriage and after. I tell you that woman has never wished that my marriage can be a success. As I told you at the beginning of the interview, she did not like me. She liked the woman whom my ex-husband ended up marrying after the divorce. I mean they even tried to kill me with poison, so that after I die my ex-husband can marry the woman. If somebody hates you to the extent that she attempts to kill you, you must know that that person does not love both you and your children. I strongly believe that my mother in law did not love my children as well. I never allowed my children to visit her, and she never showed any interest in them.....*

### *Relationships with other relatives*

Besides, grandparents, children also had relationships with other non-elderly relatives such as aunts, uncles, nieces, cousins, nephews, etc. Non-elderly relatives who had close relationships with children provided similar types of support to that provided by grand mothers. In addition, they provided financial and material support to the children. Just like children's relationships with grandparents, some older children's relationships with non-elderly relatives were often reciprocal. Most children (especially those from low income families and rural areas) provided child care services to uncles, aunts, and cousins during school holidays, and the uncles and other non-elderly relatives sometimes bought them clothes or toys or gave them money. The extent to which non-elderly relatives provided material and financial support for children was however limited since they also had their own families to look after. The fact that children's relationships with both their elderly and non-elderly relatives were reciprocal supports one feature of the sociology of childhood paradigm that children have competencies.

Most children did not perceive relatives as sources of stress for them prior to the divorce. However two mothers pointed out that some of their relatives were causing stress to them before the divorce and this affected their relationships with their children. The two mothers reported that because their ex-husbands gave their relatives most of their salaries, this caused economic hardships and stress to both themselves and their children. This shows that the influence of networks on children



can take place indirectly.

### *Children's relationships with domestic workers*

Domestic workers in Botswana are people who are hired by families (especially medium and high class ones) to help with household chores as well as to take care of children. These are mainly girls and sometimes women from the age of 15 upwards who had not performed well in school and who had limited chances of finding other types of employment.

Respondents perceived children's relationships with maids as not durable. Durability refers to the degree of stability of an individual's links with his / her network members (Mitchell and Trikett, 1980). Out of the 25 families that participated in this study, nine had hired domestic workers prior to the separation. Mothers reported that because maids are not given any training in their work, some of them lacked skills in performing household duties and child care, while some were just lazy. The above factors led mothers to dismiss maids frequently and hire new ones. One child revealed that in the year preceding the interview (when his younger sister was born), her parents changed maids eight times.

About two mothers perceived domestic workers as valuable helpers and noted that life would have been hectic for them without them. Contrary to these mothers' reports, their children felt ambivalent about their relationships with maids. The children pointed out that maids interfered with their freedom and caused stress to them. One of the children said:

*....Sometimes I came with my friends home, and when we wanted to watch some movies, they told me that they wanted to watch programmes which they liked. Because they were all older than me, they always did what they wanted. My parents had always told me not to argue with adults, so I never argued with them.... (Aron, 13 years)*

Kabelo, boy aged 19, said

*I like rock music, and I enjoy it if I play it loud. But when I did that, Ausi always told me that she was irritated because she was suffering from high blood pressure. Okay, she was old, but not too old, and I didn't dispute the fact that she was sick. But what worried me was that when I asked my parents to hire a young maid, they said young maids frequently quit jobs, therefore they preferred an older one.*

Five children from different families reported that some domestic workers had a

tendency to speak angrily to them, their friends and their younger siblings saying they played games that made the houses and compounds dirty. Only two out of nine children reported positive relations with domestic workers as evidenced by the following interaction between one of the children and the researcher.

*Interviewer: Can you tell me about the aunts you lived with before your mum and dad stopped staying together?*

*Pitso, boy aged 14: Yes, we lived with, ummm, how many, I think four. The first two were not very good to me, but the last two were very good. I liked them a lot. (Child smiled)*

*Interviewer: What did you like about them?*

*Child: Many things.*

*Interviewer: Like...*

*Pitso: They cooked nice food for me, washed my clothes and ironed them. My parents were not in the home most of the time and we spent most time with our aunts. Oh, I remembered one other thing that I liked about the last maid, which we stayed with. She used to help us with homework, and she was very good at that because she did not get short tempered with us like my parents. Again because my parents liked to quarrel a lot, they did not have much time to help me with my schoolwork. I was very sad when she stopped staying with us.*

### *Relationships with peers and friends*

It should be noted that friendship networks are not static, but change over time. Younger children had difficulty in recalling vividly their friendships before the separation. They might have had different friends, compared to adolescents who are likely to have had stable relationships with their friends as they seek more companionship and confide more in each other than they do in siblings and parents. Most older children reported that they had close and supportive relationships with their friends before separation. Several children reported that they shared their worries about the marital problems that existed in their families and that friends were sympathetic. Three children said friends advised them to advise their mothers to report the violence to women's advocacy organisations or to the police. Not all children shared their family problems with friends. Some said they did not do so because they perceived their parents' attitudes to talking about family problems to people outside their families as negative.



Gender differences were noted among children's reports. Girls reported spending little time with friends because their mothers did not allow them to spend as much time with friends as boys. According to some girls, their mothers always insisted that they should stay at home or not very far from home most of the time to help with childcare and other household chores. For example, when visitors came, girls rather than boys are expected to make tea for them. Some teenage girls' friends were not living in the neighbourhoods they lived in, so they perceived their mothers' insistence on not visiting friends who lived far from them as unfair. One child however reported that she did not have any friends prior to the separation because her father prohibited her from maintaining contact with friends.

### *Relations with neighbours*

Because children's relationships with neighbourhood friends have been discussed in the above section, here the focus will be only on adult neighbours. Children and mothers reported that children's relationships with adults in the neighbourhood were okay. When asked to elaborate on their statements, they had little to say, while some just said the relationships were neither supportive nor stressful.

### *Relationships with professionals*

Teachers were the professionals that all children mentioned as having had frequent contact with before the separation. Other professionals that some children mentioned included nurses and doctors. Children's contact with teachers was solely educational, while that of children and the medical personnel was solely medical. None of the mothers had told either the teachers or the medical personnel about the problems that existed in the children's homes, such as violence. Two mothers were aware that violence led to a decline in their children's school performance, but had not taken any action until the teachers called them to discuss their children's problems.

The absence of social workers in primary schools may have contributed to the schools not playing any role in the children's lives. School counsellors in secondary schools have been employed in recent years, but it looked as if most secondary school children who participated in this study were not aware of their existence and role as none reported having had contact with them.



Only one child had contact with the police when she and her mother were reporting sexual abuse. The child reported how non-threatening the police were despite the fact that she thought police were intimidating people. She perceived the two police officers (a man and a woman) that were interviewing her as sympathetic, and this made her feel comfortable about revealing what happened. She appreciated the fact that the police officers allowed her to be interviewed alone, not with her mother, because she would not have felt comfortable talking in the presence of her mother. The child however had never received any counselling. When asked whether she wished to be linked with counselling services by the researcher, the child said she no longer wanted to discuss the abuse with anyone and she hoped that if she no longer talked about it, she would forget it as time went on.

The lack of contact between children and professionals before divorce is not surprising because in Botswana, it is rare for children to seek help on their own (independent of their parents). While parents are free to seek help from professionals regarding their personal problems, children do not have that freedom and are not encouraged to do so. Some children who were victims of violence in this study confirmed this. The following quotation from Tebogo, a girl aged 16, who was a victim of parental violence illustrates how children as a minority group lack power to influence their own lives.

*I never knew that children could be encouraged to report what their parents are doing to them until one day when I heard people on the radio talking about parents who beat their children too much. The woman who was talking said that if there are children who feel that their parents beat them too much, they can report to some people, I forgot the people she was referring to. My father then got angry and said such people are going to encourage children to report their parents for nothing and that if his child can do that, he will beat both the child severely and the people that the child has reported to death. I got scared because I knew he meant it, so I never thought of seeking any help from adults outside the family.*

### ***Perceptions of how children fared emotionally and behaviourally prior to separation***

In discussing children's behavioural functioning prior to the separation, respondents focused on two aspects: school performance and behaviour in the home. A few mothers and children reported that children's schoolwork suffered as a result of violence that children witnessed in the family prior to the separation. This shows that



some behaviour problems existed prior to separation and therefore could not be attributed to separation. This finding parallels that of Elliot and Richards (1991: 274) who found that 'some of the problems for children which have been attributed to parental separation / divorce in previous cross-sectional studies may in fact be present prior to the parental separation'.

Besides school performance, most mothers reported that children's general behaviour in the home prior to separation was satisfactory. According to mothers, children generally feared fathers as they knew that when they misbehaved, they would discipline them. Only three mothers in the study reported that some of their children started to misbehave when they realised that their fathers were absent from the homes most of the time. The mothers reported that children began to arrive home late and also to spend more time with friends.

The above two paragraphs have focused on children's behaviour prior to the separation. In this paragraph, I focus on perceptions of their emotional functioning. Most children pointed out that prior to separation, their emotions were largely preoccupied with violence that was prevalent in their homes. As we have seen on the section that focused on the effects of violence on children, violence affected children's emotional wellbeing to a large extent. It provoked among children feelings of fear, sadness, anger as well as low self-esteem. Children reported that they internalised these feelings. Mothers on the other hand were not aware of children's emotions as well as the extent to which they internalised feelings. Not only were some children's emotions affected by the violence that prevailed in most families, they were also associated with the poor relationships that they had with one or more of their family members. Consequently, several children in the study who experienced multiple stressors (for example, were victims and witnesses of parental violence, and had poor relationships with family members) reported that they were more affected emotionally than their counterparts who experienced only one stressor. Kabelo, a 19-year-old boy, for example, attempted suicide as a result of all the negative experiences in his family prior to his parents' separation.

### ***Children as active agents***

The foregoing discussion has shown that most children perceived some of their pre-

separation experiences as stressful. However, they were not passive, but took steps to cope with the stressful circumstances. For example, some children reported that they coped with witnessing parental violence by trying to convince their mothers to leave the marital homes. They perceived this step as unsuccessful because the mothers continued to stay. This shows that, although children may have limited power to influence their lives, they often try to do so nevertheless.

Another way that shows that some children were active agents prior to separation was the efforts they took to try and cope with the violence that was prevalent in their homes. A few older boys for example pointed out that they used to physically intervene to try and stop their fathers from beating their mothers. Other children tried to cope with violence by one or more of the following ways: spending most of the time outside the home; withdrawal from friends; and talking to friends and relatives.

### ***Resiliency***

Although children experienced a wide range of stressors (largely witnessing parents' violence) and being victims of it, accounts of several older boys and girls indicate that they were able to thrive in the face of adversity. In other words, they were resilient. Resilience in the context of this study refers to coping relatively well in the face of adversity. This definition is closely related to that of Garnezy (1991: 466) who noted that resiliency refers to 'the maintenance of competent functioning despite an interfering emotionality'.

Children who said they coped well pointed out that the stressors they experienced had a minimal impact on their academic, social as well as psychological lives. Accounts of resilient children prior to the separation give us some clues about circumstances that enabled them to be resilient (protective factors). The finding that several older adolescents and no child in the younger group said they coped well shows that age played a role in resiliency for children in this study. One reason why age is an influential factor may be because older adolescents are less dependent on their parents than younger children. Another factor that seemed to facilitate resiliency was a close relationship with one or more of the following: peers, parents, or adult relative. The finding that resilient children perceived their relations with peers and parents as close and supportive confirms those of studies from other countries (cf.



Emery and Forehand, 1994). Resilient children had also experienced few rather than multiple stressors.

Several indicators of resiliency were noted from accounts of children who said they coped well. These include satisfactory performance in school and / or extra mural activities and good relationships with friends.

## ***Conclusion***

The chapter has discussed the different experiences which children underwent prior to the separation, as well as how they perceived them. Most children witnessed violence between parents before the separation for many years and perceived it as a major source of stress. Other experiences that were perceived as stressful by children are being victims of violence, economic hardship and poor relationships with family members. Not all children viewed their pre-separation experiences as stressful, some did not. Children in this group fell in one or more of the following subgroups: those who perceived their relationships with fathers as close, those who lived in non-violent families as well as those who did not experience a low level of family income. All the above experiences of children show that divorce is a process, which created changes in children's lives. Some changes were positive while others were negative.

Children's pre-separation experiences and their effects on them differed according to age, gender; their relationships with social network members, father-child relations, mother-child relations as well as sibling relations. The experiences of children who participated in the study were unique, diverse and dynamic. Findings of this chapter have implications for theory, practice and policy. They show that children's relations with family and social network members are not always supportive, but can be stressful. The findings also show the importance of paying attention to children's perceptions. Both practitioners and policy makers should be aware that not all families that subsequently split were unhealthy for children before divorce. Some are peaceful and it is therefore vital to explore how children themselves perceive their families rather than to impose preconceived ideas about family life. It is also imperative for practitioners not to assume that siblings' experiences are always similar, but should seek children and siblings' opinions. Furthermore, practitioners

should also seek children's opinions on the causes of their poor relationships with social network members, so that they may find ways of reducing the influence of negative networks. Practitioners could also have to help children who lack supportive network members, such as the child who was prevented from having friends, to establish supportive friendship networks.



## CHAPTER 6

### **Making Sense of the Separation**

This chapter analyses how children created explanations for their parents' separation. It also explores mothers' perceptions of how they responded to children's communication needs, and the underlying beliefs that influenced their responses. The argument of this chapter is that the meanings that children attached to their parents' separations were influenced by: communication with both family and social network members, the strategies they used to influence the communication process and the responses they received, their understanding of the separation, as well as their interpretation of their experiences.

The chapter is divided into three sections. Section one explores the role that communication played in shaping children's constructions of the separation. The second section presents evidence that shows how children were active agents in responding to their parents' separation, as well as how this influenced the meanings they attached to the separation. Children reviewed their parents' marriage, and as such, developed elaborate accounts of their experiences. The last section focuses on how children's communication with family and social network members and the strategies they used shaped their understanding of separation. Implications of such understanding are discussed.

Communication is an important concept in this chapter because according to the social construction perspective, people's behaviour, experiences and the meanings they ascribe to such experiences, depend upon their interactions with others. The chapter largely focuses on mothers' (rather than fathers') role in communicating with children about divorce because they were the custodial parents therefore the only adults who had lived continuously with children, and had closer and more frequent contacts with them. The role they played in communicating with children therefore deserves attention in its own right.

Several factors impacted upon the way children developed meaning of their experiences. Firstly, the historical and cultural contexts that children lived in shaped the way they made sense of divorce. Accounts of separation that are analysed in this chapter as well as throughout the dissertation occurred in Botswana - a developing

country - in 1998. Evidence of this context should be taken into account in interpretations that respondents made of the separation. For example, the way children in this study made sense of separation is likely to differ from the way children who lived prior to urbanisation, migration and industrialisation would have done. In earlier times, members of the same family group lived close together in the same household, ward or village and all household members were obliged to support one another in accordance with the roles expected from each family member (Molokomme, 1987c). Therefore, children's life experiences were less affected as a result of divorce because divorce resulted in minimal disruption of the family's material and social supports (Himonga, 1985). Today most people have migrated from rural to urban areas leaving behind members of the extended family and the system of support available to divorced women and their children has been weakened. The point being put across in this paragraph basically is that the meanings that children attached to their experiences can vary from place to place and over time (see also Richards, 1982b).

Besides the historical and cultural contexts, children's and mothers' accounts were also influenced by the fact that people tend to present social identities for themselves. They construct accounts that make sense to themselves and try to persuade the listener /s of the validity of their claims (Riessman, 1990).

Secondly, the development of parental roles is an ongoing and problematical process (Backett, 1982), therefore mothers continuously integrated new information and perspectives. In addition, mothers assigned meaning to their parental behaviour on the basis of their beliefs. Beliefs are not static, but are dynamic and ongoing. Similarly, 'meaning is not static, it is constantly reworked as new events and discontinuities are integrated into the story of one's life' (Riessman, 1990: 13). The ongoing / dynamic nature of parental roles, beliefs and meanings therefore imply that mothers' accounts represented what they were able to recall during the interview process. Recalling what happened and why can be a difficult exercise as pointed out by (Riessman, 1990: 64) when she wrote that when creating accounts, ' people struggle to integrate disjunctive experiences into personal biographies, not always as quickly as they might wish'.



## **The role of communication**

Burgoyne et al, (1987: 137) summarised the communication needs of children experiencing divorce as follows: i) 'accurate information about what is happening to their parents' marriage, and its implications for their own lives': ii) opportunities for talking about their experiences and fears and for comparing them with those of others'. Most children in this study however pointed out that their communication needs were not adequately met.

### **Communication with mothers**

#### *Children's views of communication*

Only six children expressed satisfaction about the communication they received from their mothers regarding divorce and related changes. These children mentioned that their mothers sought their opinions, told them why they had decided to leave their fathers, as well as the implications of the separation for their lives. They pointed out that they understood the explanations particularly as they were aware of the unhappiness that existed in their families prior to the separation. This unhappiness led them to believe that their parents' marriages were harmful, for them as well as for their mothers. They were of the opinion that married people should not have frequent conflicts and arguments or fight and should communicate openly with each other. Because children felt that their parents' marriages lacked the above features, they believed their parents should separate. Some of them said that the communication between them and their mothers reinforced their beliefs that the separation was the right step to take.

*.....I wanted my mother to stop living with my father. She had always said that she will, but she never did. When she told me that she was moving out of the home, I said yes, because violence was not good for any one of us. Surprisingly, she said if any one of us wanted to remain in the home, we were free to do so. But I told her that I was moving with her..... (Antony, boy aged 19 whose experience of separation was 4 years from the period of the interview)*

*My mother told me that we should pack our things and leave the house before my father comes from work because she no longer wanted to be beaten by my father. I could not believe what she was saying because for a long time, my sister and me had long asked her to leave my father because of the violence, but she couldn't. My father was not able to communicate with my mother. He just wanted my mother to listen and agree with what he was saying.....He no longer loved my mother, he liked to beat her. I believe that one cannot beat someone if he still loves her. I found no reason why my mother should continue staying with him. ....Anyway, I was happy that at*



*long last, she made up her mind. (Lizzy, girl aged 16 whose experience of separation was a year prior to the interview).*

Lizzy's sibling – a girl aged 14 also revealed that her mother openly told her what was happening and why.

*Both my sister and me wanted mum to stop staying with dad because dad was not treating her good. So when she told us that she was leaving, we were happy... ..*

### *Children who expressed dissatisfaction about communication with mothers*

Most children (19 out of 25, both girls and boys) - irrespective of time since separation, the nature of their pre-separation relationships with mothers as well as socio-economic backgrounds - expressed dissatisfaction with the way their mothers communicated with them about separation and related changes. Children had deeply held beliefs about how their parents (especially mothers) should have communicated with them and these influenced their interpretations of dissatisfaction with communication. They wanted mothers to answer their questions adequately and patiently, to tell them in detail what was happening and why, to seek their opinions on issues of custody, contact with non-custodial parents, etc, as well as not to be angry when they asked them questions. Children also believed that they were innocent and did not deserve angry responses from their mothers. From the analysis of children's accounts, their lack of satisfaction was categorised into the following three types of dissatisfaction: inadequate or brief explanations, dissatisfaction with the way in which questions were handled; and dissatisfaction about unsought opinions and feelings.

#### *Inadequate explanations*

Several children perceived their mothers' explanations as inadequate and brief. The explanations did not detail how the separation was going to affect them, plans for continued contact with fathers, where their families were going to live, and other issues that would have helped children to understand the separation and its implications for them. Despite this perception, some of them did not ask questions or seek clarification. They justified their reluctance to seek clarification on cultural grounds and adult privacy as shown by the last two sentences of the following exchange between the interviewer and Malebogo, a 14 year old girl who believed she had a closer relationship with her father than with her mother prior to the separation.



*Malebogo: My mother told me that we had stopped staying with my father because he used to beat her.*

*Interviewer: Were you satisfied with the explanation?*

*Malebogo: No. It was just a short explanation. I wanted to be told everything so that I could understand what was going on. I used to hear my father angrily telling her to stop seeing the man she was seeing. Sometimes he would even beat her. So I think she did not tell me everything that happened.....*

*Interviewer: Did you ask any questions?*

*Malebogo: No, because in this culture a child is not allowed to ask questions about issues that concern her parents' lives. I knew if I had asked her questions, she could have got angry with me....*

Kabelo, a 19-year-old who perceived his relationship with his parents both before and after separation as poor also expressed similar experiences.

*.....One day, a big truck came and my mother told us to load our things in it because we were moving. I did not know where we were moving to and why.....I did not even have the chance to say bye to my friends in the neighbourhood, and I really felt sad about it.....*

The account of Kabelo's sister, a girl aged 16 – who apparently viewed her relationship with her mother both prior to and after divorce as 'just okay' showed that she was also not satisfied about the way and content of her mother's communication with her.

*.....when my mother told us to put our things in the truck because we were moving, I asked her why, and she said she will tell me later. She never told me. It was only one day when I heard her talking to one woman who visited her telling her that she left my father because he used to beat her. Before that I was always wondering why my father never visited us and why we never visited him...No one told me anything....*

### *Responses to questions*

About half of children who expressed dissatisfaction about the way communication took place said they were unhappy about how their questions were answered. Some said their questions were not fully answered, some said they were not answered at all and others expressed unhappiness about their mothers' angry responses to their questions.

*My father just told us to remove our belongings from his house and move away. He was very angry with my brother, my mother and me I don't know why. That is the*



*only information I got. When I asked my mother why my father chased us away, she said she did not know. I became confused. I did not understand how my father could chase us away from his yard, and how my mother could say she did not know why we were chased out..... (Joseph, aged 13 whose experience of separation was between 2 and 3 years before the interview and who viewed his relationship with his mother as neither good nor poor prior to separation, and better after)*

The above words not only show Joseph's dissatisfaction about both the form and content of his mother's communication with him, but also show that father's communication impacted on his communication with his mother.

In expressing dissatisfaction about her mothers' response to her questions, another child said:

*Every time when I ask my mother about the separation, she angrily tells me to go and ask my father. This kind of response makes me feel very sad. I don't think I have done anything wrong that makes my mother to talk to me angrily about my father. It pains me a lot when my mother talks to me angrily about my father. I never talk to her angrily, I talk to her with respect, and I wish she could also to do the same. I feel that my mother is neglecting me because she knows that I never see my father. She is the only parent that I am staying with, and she is the one who is supposed to tell me about things that I need information on... (Maria, girl, aged 16 who perceived her pre-separation relationship with her mother as not close as that between her and her father)*

The underlined words of Maria show that she expected reciprocity in the way her mother related to her. They also show that she perceived her relationship with her mother was asymmetrical. Maria's mother as well as parents in general, for example, have the power to punish and talk the way they want to children, but children do not have a corresponding power at their disposal. Also implicit in Maria's words are feelings of neglect and sadness that arose as a result of her mother's angry response to her questions. The child needed information about her father, whom she felt closer to than her mother, however her mother perceived the communication as upsetting, and became angry. This reaction added to the child's feelings of sadness that already existed because of her father's departure from the home. This shows how a custodial parent's response can add to the child's feelings of sadness. Maria not only needed information about separation, she also needed emotional support from her mother because of the loss of a relationship with her father. However, she did not receive the support. Previous research (Buchanan et al, 1992) has shown that the provision of emotional support by the caring / custodial parents is important to children's adjustment.



Feelings of neglect that Maria associated with her mother's response have implications for her welfare as they can make her not initiate discussions or questions relating to separation or even other issues which worry her with her mother in the future. This can cause enormous amount of stress as she tries to deal with life issues on her own without a parent's guidance.

Maria's sibling – a girl aged 10 who like Maria, had a close relationship with her father before separation did not make any reference to her mother's angry responses. She however pointed out that because she was aware of her mothers' past responses to Maria's efforts to see their father, she had never tried to ask questions about neither her father nor her permission to see him. This shows that mothers' responses to children in the same family influence siblings' actions.

The following exchange between the interviewer and Thato, a girl aged 17, shows other experiences of children who were not satisfied with their mothers' responses to their questions.

*Thato: I asked my mother why dad no longer visited us, and she said it is because he is always busy at his work.*

*Interviewer: Did you have any other questions or comments?*

*Thato: Yes, I told mum I would like to visit dad at work, and she said she wouldn't allow me because it is dad who is supposed to visit us. I asked her why she said it is dad who is supposed to visit us and she got angry with me and told me that I was not speaking to her like a child should speak to her parent. She said I was not respecting her and my manners were poor. She also told me that she did not want to talk about such things anymore.....*

*Interviewer: Were you satisfied about the way your mother talked to you about the separation?*

*Thato: Ummm, I don't know. I think I was not, but don't tell her because if she hears this, she will get angry with me.*

The reaction of Thato's mother (for instance, telling Thato that she was not speaking to her as a child should speak to a parent and her perception of the child's questions as lack of respect) is both a personal and a cultural product. The Botswana culture puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of children (especially girls) being passive, submissive and obedient to parents (Maundeni, 1999). It is not surprising that the mother viewed the child's persistent questions as a sign of disrespect. The mother's



belief that children should talk to adults in a certain manner, not just in any manner they want, further shows that she held the images of children as 'learning' beings that needed boundaries to be set for them. In this case, the boundaries served to protect the mother's needs and interests, rather than the child's because the mother got upset as a result of the child's questions. This shows that sometimes parents put their interests before their children's. It also raises the question of how far children's resistance is traditional or influenced by social change.

### *Unsought / ignored opinions*

Almost all children who expressed dissatisfaction about the way their mothers communicated with them said their views about divorce related issues such as custody and contact with their fathers were not sought. Children who perceived their relationships with their fathers prior to the separation as close reported feelings of sadness and resentment as a result of their unsought opinions, while their counterparts who viewed their pre-separation relationships with fathers as not close did not express such feelings.

*After my father and mother stopped staying together, I did not see my father for many months. I felt sad. My mother did not ask me if I wanted to see him. I used to ask my brother to accompany me to my father's place of work, but he used to refuse. I was young, I could not go on my own. My mother did not do anything when I told her that I wanted to see my father.... (Aron, aged 13 )*

Aron's sibling, a boy aged 16 who perceived his pre-separation relationship with his father as not close also pointed out that his opinions on custody and contact with his father were not sought. However he did not express any feelings of resentment and sadness about the unsought opinions.

The above analysis of children's accounts of dissatisfaction with communication shows that children wanted their mothers to communicate with them openly, honestly, in detail and without displaying feelings of anger. Children expected their communication needs to be met by their mothers, particularly as they were their custodial parents. The responses children received from their mothers may be seen as uncaring or insensitive to their communication needs. However, it should be noted that the circumstances that most mothers were under such as economic and emotional distress may have influenced their responses. Mothers' abilities to meet children's communication needs were not only influenced by the economic and emotional



distress they were undergoing, they were also (to a large extent) shaped by their perceptions and beliefs of children's needs as illustrated in the following section.

### Mothers' beliefs and strategies

Mothers in this study held different views about separation communication compared with the children. These beliefs not only influenced their interactions with their children, but also influenced them to construct accounts that made sense, both to themselves and to others. A majority of mothers held a developmental view that communication about separation should only take place when children were old enough to understand, some believed communication should take place irrespective of children's ages, while a few felt that communication with children about separation was not important. Some mothers believed that younger children did not know what was going on. Mothers constructed and legitimised their own behaviour and strategies with reference to the beliefs they held about separation communication with children. These influenced whether they communicated with children, the timing as well as the content of communication. A detailed discussion of the beliefs as well as how they influenced mother-child separation communication is presented below.

#### *Open communication*

A minority of mothers (six- of various ages, economic / occupational, religious backgrounds) expressed the view that they believed in open communication between themselves and their children, not only on separation issues, but on other issues that affect children's lives. Four of the mothers worked in professional jobs and two worked in manual jobs. These six mothers were mothers of the children who expressed satisfaction about both the method and content of communication they received from their mothers. These mothers perceived open communication as important for the future wellbeing of children. They noted that if children realised that they were communicating openly with them, they were likely to trust them so that in future when they had problems, they could feel free to discuss their problems with them, rather than with friends because friends could mislead them. They felt that communication should take place with children irrespective of children's ages, that children should be told the truth and also allowed to express their opinions. They therefore revealed that they told their children about separation both before it took



place and during the time when it was taking place.

Beliefs such as those in open communication do not take place in a vacuum, but can be influenced by several factors. One of these was found to be mothers' backgrounds as evidenced by the following words of one mother.

*I grew up in a home where there is open communication. I therefore strongly believe in open communication in the family. I believe a child is never too young to be communicated with. Even a four-year-old needs information about parental separation. I strongly believe that if children realise that their mothers communicate openly with them about different issues, they will also feel free to communicate openly with their mothers about issues which concern them, and this means that they will have a good relationship both in the short term and in the future. I told my children about the separation. In fact she was more aware of her father's unacceptable actions than me. She used to tell me everything that happened in my absence. I also allowed her to tell me how she felt about the fact that her father had filed for a divorce. She told me that she was happy that her father took that step. After she told me that she was happy, I told her what the divorce meant. For example, moving from the place where we were staying, and so on, and I also told her that if she wanted to continue seeing her father, she should feel free to do so because divorce is between me and her father, not between her and her father.*

Another mother who believed in open communication said:

*You should have noticed that I am very open with children during the one-hour that we have been talking. The line between them and me is very slim. I communicate with them about all issues that affects their lives as well as those that affect my life. I believe in communication. I discussed with them about my decision to leave their father long before the separation as well as during the separation. I asked them how they felt about it and also gave them choices. I asked them which parent they wanted to stay with, they told me that they wanted to stay with me. I then told them that if they wanted to continue visiting their father, they should do so. I also told them that the separation would result in us experiencing temporary hardships because we were going to look for a place to stay, not have a car for sometimes and so on.*

The woman's story seems to be an extreme one where boundaries were very open. She viewed boundaries in her family as open so that she and her children felt comfortable to talk with each other about matters that affected their lives.

Open communication between mothers and children that characterised the six families resulted in family members acquiring shared definitions and perceptions of the separation and related issues. This is evidenced by the fact that these mothers and their children held similar views about the causes of separation, compared to those in most families where there was no open communication about separation.



Consequently, children pointed out that open communication was beneficial to them in several ways. It enabled them to talk about their feelings to their mothers and also reduced their fears regarding the implications of separation and its related events.

The above discussion shows that mothers' beliefs about parent-child separation communication largely influenced whether they communicated with children or not, as well as what they said to children.

### *Temporary concealment*

Temporary concealment is one theme that emerged from mothers' accounts of communication with children about separation. The word 'temporary' was used to denote views of mothers who believed that communication with children should only take place after children are old enough to understand. These mothers came from a wide range of socio-economic and educational backgrounds. This shows that education does not necessarily change mothers' beliefs on raising children. Slightly more than half of the mothers in this study stated that they believed that communication should take place only when children were old enough to understand. Mothers defined mature children differently. Some associated maturity with children's ages, (e.g. above 18), while others associated it with children's completion of school and / or participation in the job market.

There were three reasons that explained the above beliefs held by mothers. Firstly, they perceived children as vulnerable. This perception was further confirmed by their beliefs that allowing younger children to participate in the interview would remind them of traumatic events that would upset them. In fact some mothers did not allow young children to be interviewed because of this belief.

Secondly, they perceived children as evolving beings who were in the process of growing up and therefore not capable of understanding and / or coping with the explanations. This perception was based on developmental beliefs. Mothers who held this belief pointed out that if separation took place before children reached those ages, communication should be postponed, because children below those ages could not understand, could feel sad, or develop negative attitudes towards their fathers as illustrated by the following words of some mothers.

*...I just did not say anything to them because I don't want them to hate their father. They are still too young to be told such things. Maybe I will die before their father and I don't want my children not to have a parent at all because if I tell them all what happened, they may not want to have contact with him when they grow up.....*

*I will tell him when he is old enough to understand. He is only ten now, and he can't understand. Again I don't want to make him sad... .*

Thirdly, some believed divorce communication with children who are still attending school would disturb them and affect their school performance.

*I am a teacher, and I know that talking to children about these things can affect them in their schoolwork. So I will talk to them after they complete school.....*

Mothers' beliefs that children were vulnerable and unable to understand were probably not the only reasons that made them to conceal information from children. Some may have concealed information from children because they wanted to protect themselves from disclosing issues they perceived as too emotional or threatening for them. In other words, they may have had hidden agendas for their actions and beliefs which they did not reveal during the interview.

Mothers' beliefs that communication could make children sad are striking because they indicate that mothers assumed that in the absence of communication, children might not become sad. However, this study as well as previous research from other countries (Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Kurdek and Siesky, 1980; Walckaz and Burns, 1984) has found that the absence of communication with children about separation makes them experience difficulties in accepting what has happened. This has emotional implications for children and may lead them to have difficulties in adjusting.

Mothers' beliefs that interviewing young children might upset them are also striking. This belief overlooks the possibility that young children may not have talked about their traumatic experiences to anyone, particularly that they may not yet have developed stable relationships with adolescent friends and the interview may give them a chance to talk. Mothers' refusal to allow young children to participate in the interview shows that children do not have as much power over their lives as adults.

Beliefs that were widely held by mothers in relation to communication with children and children's ages resulted in mothers holding comparative images of children.



Mothers reported that they gave older children detailed and honest explanations, while younger children were either not given any explanation, or were not given detailed ones. Interviews with siblings also confirmed this practice, because explanations that were provided to older children in same families were different from those provided to younger ones. This finding parallels that of Kurdek and Siesky (1980) who found that youngest children were more frequently given either one-sided explanations or no explanation at all. It seems that all the above images that some mothers held of children created difficulties for them because they did not openly communicate with children. Consequently, children who reported that they were not provided with adequate explanations of what was happening as well as its implications reported feelings of confusion.

Further analysis of mothers' accounts of communication about divorce with children showed that although mothers were aware of the various relationships that siblings had with fathers, their communication with different siblings did not take this into account. For example, mothers' narratives indicated that the only criteria they used to determine the amount of information they gave to siblings was age. They did not take into account that siblings who had closer relations with fathers needed more informational support on issues such as where they could meet with fathers, how often such contact would take place, etc, than their counterparts who did not have close relationships with fathers. As shown by the following words of Daisy's sibling, the lack of communication on such issues was more stressful for siblings who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as close than for their counterparts who did not.

*.....I was not told anything. I asked my mother and she did not say anything. She said I should ask my father, but I never saw my father for a long time, and I always felt sad about it.*

*Interviewer: What questions did you have?*

*Daisy's sibling: I wanted to know where I can see daddy and how often....., and who will take me to see him.....*

Beliefs and views are not static, but change with time and as people are exposed to other experiences. For example, one mother pointed out that although she had always believed that children above 11 years could easily understand, now she believed they were too young to understand. She said:



*Because Peter was only 11 years when separation took place, I did not tell him anything. He was very close to his father and he kept asking me questions about where his father was, how come we did not stay with him, and so on. I just told him that his father was not staying with us because he was always on trips, which are related to his job. I did not want to make him sad. I only told him the truth after he turned 12 because I always believed that at that age, he was going to be able to understand. He had stayed for one year without his father, and I thought he was used to life without him. However, I became sad when I saw him crying after I told him that we are never going to stay with his father again because his father had another family. I regretted why I told him, and now I believe that at age 12, children are still not mature enough to understand.*

The fact that the mother viewed Peter's crying as a sign of immaturity and lack of understanding is interesting because a response such as crying is not only manifested by children, but can be manifested by adults as well. But it looks as if when adults manifest it, it is not viewed in the same way. The mother did not ask the child whether he understood the explanation, but just assumed that he did not. The tendency of mothers to make assumptions about their children's behaviour without seeking their opinions was found to be common among mothers who participated in this study.

Because mothers believed that young children did not understand what was going on, they did not seek their opinions on issues of custody and contact. Mothers believed that their children were too young and not capable of having independent opinions. These mothers did not only assume, but believed, that children held the same opinions as them. In other words, they projected their feelings on to their children and acted according to those projections. However, those projections were not well founded. The mothers perceived themselves as rational, logical beings who behaved and thought coherently, but failed to perceive children as individuals with a distinct world-view. Mothers' perceptions of children as incapable of expressing and articulating their feelings and opinions shows that they held images of children as 'evolving beings' who were not mature. These images were made clear in the following conversation between the interviewer and one of the mothers.

*Mother: Sometimes it is difficult for people who do not have children to understand these things. Do you have children yourself?*

*Interviewer: Yes. I have two.*

*Mother: How old are they?*



*Interviewer: One is 2 years and the other one is 10.*

*Mother: Okay, you will understand why I did not ask my children certain things because you also have children. I thought you don't have children like some of the educated women in this country. All my children were below 18 at the time when the separation took place. I believed they were young to be bothered with those issues. I therefore did not tell them anything nor seek their opinions on issues related to the separation. I have always made decisions which are good for them from the time when they were born until now, and they never objected to my decisions... ..*

The above quote indicates that the mother held a certain image about her parental role. She believed that one of her roles as a parent was to make decisions for children, until they reached the age of 18. She was of the opinion that because she had always made decisions for her children and they had never complained, this showed that all such decisions were good. It is interesting that she viewed the absence of children's complaints as a sign that children were satisfied with the decisions she made, however this might not necessarily be true.

Examining the conversation between the interviewer and the mother above, we see how she constructs her account of communication with children in the context of the research interview itself. Her knowledge that the interviewer, like herself, had children made her feel free and comfortable to express her views.

Mothers' actions in not seeking their children's opinions were not only justified by the images which they held of children, but were also justified on the basis of their ex husbands' actions and behaviours. Mothers pointed out that because the children's fathers were not good to them, they assumed that children would not want to maintain contact with them, or stay with them, and as a result, did not check children's opinions, but simply assumed that the children felt the same way as they did. By legitimising their actions in this way, mothers were drawing on the cultural belief that 'children should be seen but not heard' that is widespread in Botswana. In this belief system, children do not have independent opinions, and therefore, there is no need for adults to hear their voices.

### *Permanent concealment*

The concept of permanent concealment was used by a few (four) mothers to explain their beliefs regarding communicating with their children about separation. These



mothers were of the opinion that divorce communication should never take place between them and their children because it was not necessary. They believed that children are young people who should not be told certain things, such as reasons why their parents stopped staying together. This view was based on generational beliefs. Besides mothers' views of children as young and therefore not needing to be told about divorce, their beliefs on permanent concealment also appeared to be influenced by the images of children's needs, which they held. They valued the fulfillment of children's basic needs as opposed to social and psychological needs. All the four mothers were from low socio-economic backgrounds, therefore it is not surprising that their main concern was with their children's basic needs. One of the women said:

*Communication with children about divorce is not important to me. What matters to me is whether children have food and clothes. I did not say anything to them about divorce.*

It is important that we do not take these explanations at face value because there might be other possible interpretations of their behaviour. For example, they may have withheld reasons to protect themselves from discussing issues they perceived as too threatening or which they perceived as taboo.

So far, the discussion has shown that most mothers in the study did not communicate openly with children about separation. Some children associated the absence of open communication with feelings of confusion, difficulties in understanding as well as in coping with the changes that took place in their families. This implies that mothers (by virtue of their position as custodial parents) need help in understanding that adequate communication with children about separation can help children to cope better with separation and related events.

Most mothers' accounts show that their ability to communicate adequately with children were to a large extent influenced by their beliefs. The divorce-related economic and emotional distress that some of them were undergoing also affected their ability to respond adequately to children's needs. The economic distress largely arose from the low family resources most families experienced as a result of divorce. This could be linked to the overall subordinate position of women in society as well as lack of material resources relative to men. The inadequate and top-down communication between most mothers and children is not a phenomenon peculiar to



the post-divorce period only. It was prevalent in most families prior to the separation. For example, as noted in chapter five, a majority of children said they were free / comfortable to discuss with mothers certain things, but not others and also that the communication was often of a top-down nature. Children were rarely consulted on family issues.

### Communication with fathers

All children except four said they did not talk to their fathers about the separation. The few number of children who said divorce communication between them and their fathers took place is not surprising taking into account information presented earlier that a majority of children (two thirds) perceived their relations with fathers before separation as either mixed or not close and also lost contact with fathers after divorce. Three of these four children expressed dissatisfaction with the communication, while one said she was satisfied. Feelings of resentment and unhappiness about both the nature and content of the communication process were also noted.

*I talked about the divorce with my father one day when he had gone to see me at school. In fact we were coming together from school, he did not know where we were staying and the only place where he could find me was at school. He was the one who started the conversation, and I did not like all that he was talking about, because I knew that he was not telling me the truth. He told me that my mother is the one who left him, that my mother was bewitching him, and that my mother had a boyfriend and that is why she left him. I became sad and angry and told him that all what he was telling me was not true, and that I am aware of everything that happened. I told him exactly why the divorce took place and also told him that he should never visit me at school because he disrupts my studies, and that if he can come to me at school again, I will report him to the police. Since that day, he stopped coming to see me at school and telling all sorts of lies. (Daisy, aged 14 who perceived his relationship with his father before separation as neutral / mixed)*

The above words came from a child who seemed (through the interviewer's observation during the interview as well as through her words) very assertive. She was able to assert herself and tell her father that he should no longer talk to her about separation. This kind of reaction from a child is unusual, particularly in a culture that discourages assertiveness among children.

The second child who said he talked to his father about separation also pointed out that his father initiated the separation conversation. The boy expressed mixed



feelings about the encounter.

*After the separation, I used to meet my father in the streets, and he used to tell me that my mother has left him, but he wished my mother would still be living with him. It sounded like he blamed my mother, he thought I did not know that it was him who was at fault. (Andrew, aged 18 who perceived his pre-separation relationship with his father in mixed terms)*

Unlike Daisy, Andrew did not respond to his father assertively, but just kept quiet. He reported being dissatisfied with the communication, and wished his father could have told him the truth. The child also noted that because his relationship with his father prior to the separation was not close, he was not surprised at the explanation that his father provided nor was he saddened by it. The third child (who apparently had frequent contact with his father) expressed dissatisfaction about his communication with his father. He pointed out that he asked his father why he did not 'just stay with them full-time because he was seeing him almost every day'. And his father said he would, but he never did.

The fourth child who apparently had a close relationship with her father prior to separation perceived communication as open and was satisfied with it. She however expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that her parents told her about separation separately, rather than jointly.

*Malebogo, girl aged 14: My father one day when I had visited him at his place of work told me something about it. He asked me if we were staying with a man. I said, yes. And he told me that it is the reason why he himself stopped staying with my mother. He also told me that the reason why he used to beat my mother was to make her stop seeing that man, but she did not.*

*Interviewer: Were you satisfied with the communication?*

*Malebogo: Yes. I was. But I am still not happy about the way, which my parents talked to me about the separation. I wanted them to talk to me at the same time, rather than one telling me in the other's absence.....*

The remaining children who perceived their relationships with fathers as close prior to the separation expressed feelings of sadness that their fathers did not communicate with them about separation. For example,

*I wish my father could have told my siblings and me that he will stop staying with us, and why, whether he will continue seeing us, how often and where we can see him.*



*Now if I want to see him, I don't know whether I should go to his home or not. I have been told that he is staying with a woman, and I hesitate to go to his home because I don't know how that woman will react.. ..... I just feel sad that my father is no longer staying with us..... (Peter, aged 12)*

The finding that children generally did not talk to their fathers is striking because one would expect children who perceived their relationships with their fathers as being good prior to the separation to have talked with their fathers about it. The meanings which children gave to good relationships therefore raise questions about the quality of the relationships. According to the children, there were a variety of reasons for the absence of communication between them and their fathers. These included the fact that they feared them, they did not see their fathers for a long time after they stopped staying with them, they did not want to make their fathers feel bad because their mothers had told them that they were the ones who caused the separation. Other children waited for their fathers to initiate the communication process, but they never did so.

To sum up the discussion on communication with fathers, almost all children (except four) in the study said they there was no divorce-related communication between them and their fathers. This was the case irrespective of the nature of their pre-separation relationships. Children who perceived their relationships with fathers prior to the separation as close expressed intense feelings of sadness about the absence of divorce communication between them and their fathers. The absence of communication on divorce – a (sensitive topic) between children and fathers is not peculiar to the post-divorce environment. It also existed prior to separation. This was evidenced by children's answer to the question 'whom would you turn to first to talk about things that worry you? Most children mentioned mothers, grandmothers and friends.

### Communication with siblings

Although mothers held certain views and beliefs about communication and also used strategies to implement their views, the extent to which they could control the communication was limited. They could not always ensure that young children were not told the truth about separation. For example, a few older siblings (three) told younger children information which mothers had concealed from them. Children revealed differences in the explanations they received from their mothers and the



ones they received from siblings. This shows that children's experiences and ideas are affected by their interactions with other family members.

A closer analysis of children's accounts showed that one of the factors that influenced children's communication (content, quality and tone) with siblings was their perceptions of how their fathers were treating them prior to the separation. For example, children who believed fathers favoured their siblings were not keen to play a positive role in providing information to others as shown by the following quotations.

*....I tried to talk to them, but they were not interested. ....they said my father did not love them as much as he loved me..... (Daisy's sibling, boy aged 11)*

*I did not discuss anything with him about my father's absence from the home. It is him who tried to talk to me. He was asking me questions, like why my father left us, things like he misses my father....., but I was not interested because my father was not nice to me, he was only nice to Aron.....As I told you, he even enrolled Aron in an English medium school but he did not do the same for me.... (Aron's sibling, boy aged 16)*

### Communication with friends and peers

None of the children in this study reported being told to keep separation news secret, and they reported talking to a wide range of people about the separation. About half of the children said they talked to friends. Gender and age differences were noted in children's reports of communication with friends. Older girls, for example, reported talking to friends immediately after the separation took place, while boys said that they did so later, because initially they felt uncomfortable about sharing the news with friends. Both older boys and girls reported that they revealed the separation news only to friends whom they perceived as trustworthy and close. They were selective in telling particular friends and not others because they did not want the separation news to be spread around the school, as they feared being stigmatised by other children. In this construction, fear of stigma hindered children from telling some of their friends, but made them confide in close friends only. Children generally reported that their friends provided advice and emotional support to them.

*I told my friends that dad was no longer staying with us, and that I did not know where he is, and why he has stopped staying with us, and that I feel sad about it. I also told them that when I ask my mother where my father is, she gets angry with me. They advised me to go to his place of work to see him, and tell him how I feel about*



*his absence from the home. They were sympathetic to me. One of the told me that her parents are also not staying together..... (Maria, girl, aged 16)*

One child reported that she disclosed the separation news to a peer (who was not necessarily her friend) because she knew that his parents were also divorced. According to the child, the peer was supportive emotionally and this helped her to accept the separation.

*The only person that I felt comfortable to talk to was a classmate of mine who is a boy whom I had recently learned that his parents were divorced. We shared stories and consoled each other. I am happy that I talked to him because it helped me to realise that other children had similar experiences as mine. I was not comfortable to share my experiences with other children, even those who were my friends because we came from different backgrounds, and I was not sure how they were going to respond..... (Daisy, aged 14)*

Previous research has shown that when children are able to tell friends openly, they are likely to adjust better (Kurdek and Siesky, 1980). Friendships, especially those involving close relationships with same sex friends, are important sources of social support for adolescents (Werner and Smith, 1982; Kurdek, 1987), therefore it is not surprising that several adolescents in this study talked to close friends usually of same gender.

The few younger children (i.e. those who were between 10 and 13) in the study seemed not to recall vividly (compared to older children) whether they talked to friends, when, as well as the responses they received from friends. The lack of clear and vivid recollections by younger children may be related to their inability compared to older children to establish and maintain close and long-lasting friendship relationships.

Children who said they did not talk to friends about separation linked the absence of such communication to a number of other factors. For example, a change of neighbourhood often resulted in them leaving old friends behind, economic declines in their families that made them look different from other children, isolation from friends which the father of one child imposed on her before the separation, and the absence of close friends. Others reported that they did not talk to friends because they had not accepted that their fathers had left them, as they had close relationships with them.



## Communication with relatives

Some children talked to relatives, especially aunts and grandmothers. There were no gender and age differences in relation to children's communication with relatives. Most children said they talked to maternal grandmothers. Children did not just talk to any relative, but only those who had good relationships with them. According to children, relatives they talked to listened carefully to their concerns and provided both informational and emotional support. Generally, the relatives told children not to tell their mothers what they told them about the causes of the separation, so the children did not.

*Grandma told me that dad had found another woman, and because of this, mum found another man as well. But as time went on, dad stopped seeing that woman and when dad told mum to leave the man she had found, mum refused... .. (Nonofu, girl aged 14).*

Communication derives its meaning not only from the content of the communication, but also from the previous history of people's relationships (Pearce and Cronen, 1980; Dallos, 1995). The above relationship was evident in this study. Children anticipated positive reactions from the relatives they spoke to as a result of their history of previous interactions with such relatives. Consequently, children pointed out that relatives talked to them openly and calmly about separation. Children therefore perceived the explanations that they were given by relatives as adequate and satisfactory, particularly as they had always suspected that the explanations their mothers provided were inadequate. They also reported that the way relatives talked to them was different from the way their mothers talked to them. For example:

*My grandma just told me without getting angry at me, but my mother got angry and said I was not talking to her like a child should talk to her parent. I knew that grandma would tell me the truth because she had always talked to me openly about issues that my parents have not talked to me about. (Kabelo, boy aged 19 who believed his grandmother was the only adult he had a close relationship with).*

A closer examination of children's accounts of communication with relatives shows that the way communication took place as well as its content was different from the way communication between mothers and children took place. Mothers had a tendency to get emotional and sometimes angry when children were talking to them about separation, while relatives did not. This is not surprising because mothers were the key people in the process of separation, while children's social network members



were not. Mothers were going through adjustment processes themselves and some, particularly those who did not want the separation to take place, found discussing the issue too sensitive and upsetting.

### Communication with professionals

Only two children (a boy and a girl) talked to professionals about their parents' separation. One talked to a social worker (who was apparently ordered by the court to compile a custody report) and the other one talked to a school counsellor. All children who participated in this study were attending school at the time when the separation took place, but none of them talked to teachers about the separation. Two children reported that their mothers talked to the teachers about separation after the teachers realised that their performance had declined greatly. According to both children and their mothers, it was the teachers who initiated the communication, not the mothers. Communication between teachers and the children's mothers however took place in the children's absence, and the two parties resolved that they would try to be supportive to the children. The exclusion of children themselves in the communication process as well as the resolution that teachers and mothers reached is striking because they assumed that they knew the kind of support children needed. These actions further served to reinforce the belief that children should be seen but not heard that has been highlighted earlier in this chapter.

The non-involvement of teachers in issues that are related to children's families was not a new phenomenon during the separation period, it was also prominent during the pre-separation period. Many other children believed it could have helped them if they had talked to professionals. A few children, however, pointed out that although they believed it could have helped them to talk to professionals, they had concerns about confidentiality. One of the children said:

*....yes, I believe it could have helped if I talked to professionals. The only problem is that I know adults usually tell other adults what children tell them. I would not like those professionals to tell my parents what I told them because I would get into trouble..... (Catherine, aged 17 whose parents separated a year prior to the interview).*

The other said that although she believed talking to a professional could have helped, she felt pessimistic about whether his parents would have allowed her to talk to

people outside the home about what happened in her family. When asked why she thought so, the child said:

*Because they themselves did not talk about what was happening in the family to me. (Katlego, girl aged 17 whose parents separated four years prior to the interview).*

So far, we have focused on the role that children's communication with family and social network members played in how children made sense of the separation. Making sense of separation for children did not only depend on their communication with social network members, it also depended on the strategies they used to influence the communication process. The next section focuses on these strategies.

### ***Children as active agents***

Although children's position relative to their parents and other adults is weak, they do not passively adapt themselves to the behaviour and actions of their parents. Sometimes they take steps to influence their experiences as well as the effects of life events in directions, which they perceive to be favourable to themselves. There were no age and gender differences in children's role as active agents. Children adopted different strategies to make sense of the separation as well as to influence their parents' actions and behaviours. These include confrontation, persistent questioning, concealment of their distress and persuading mothers to take certain steps. The strategies that will be discussed in this section show that children were not passive objects, but were active agents in the process of their parents' separation, and usually their actions and behaviours influenced those of their parents in one way or another.

Firstly, the words of Daisy that are quoted on page 142, i.e. telling her father to no longer talk to her about the divorce because he was disrupting her studies...., show that she was an active agent as well. The child did not like what the father was telling her, especially as she perceived it as not true, and therefore assertively told her father not to continue that kind of behaviour. This strategy that was adopted by the child is a brave one taking into account that fact that the child had been raised and was still living in country which emphasises obedience and passivity of children to elders.

Secondly, some children influenced the communication process through persistent questioning. Children knew that something was going on in their families, they felt



that they needed information and therefore were persistent in asking so that they could be provided with information. Consequently, some mothers who believed that young children should not be told about separation unless they were persistent in asking ended up telling their children. They did not necessarily tell them the truth. The following interaction between the interviewer and one of the mothers illustrates the point clearly.

*Mother: Although I believe that young children should not be told about separation, if the child keeps asking questions, he/she should be told something. But she should not be told the exact cause of the divorce because she/ he may feel sad and dislike the parent who caused the divorce, especially if the child loved the parent who has left the home. For example, in my case, I just told the boy that his father is no longer working in this town, and that is why he was not staying with us.*

*Interviewer: What was the child's response?*

*Mother: He asked why we couldn't just visit him, and I said we would visit him one day.*

*Interviewer: Do you think the child was satisfied?*

*Mother: Oh, yes, he was, because he did not ask any more questions.*

Contrary to the above mothers' perception that the child was satisfied with the explanation, the child himself pointed out that he was not satisfied and that the mother got angry because he kept asking more questions. Adults usually view children's resistance / expression of dislikes as inappropriate (Diana, 1998), therefore it is possible that the mother was aware that the child was not satisfied, but just denied it.

Children also acted as active agents in the separation process by protecting their mothers from getting depressed. One of the children, for example, pointed out that because of his father's absence from the home, he used to cry in private so that his mother could not see him. He explained that when his mother saw him crying, she felt more depressed. Some children were reluctant to raise the subject / ask questions because they did not want to distress their mothers. It should be noted here that the notion of children as active agents is not peculiar to the time during the separation only, it also prevailed prior to the separation as shown in chapter five.

### ***Children's understanding of separation***

According to the social constructionist approach, 'the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but results from an active, co-operative enterprise of persons in relationships' (Gergen, 1985: 267). In this section, I explore how children's communication with both family and social network members, their experiences both prior to and during the separation, as well as their role as active agents, shaped their understanding of separation. Implications for such understanding will also be highlighted. Generally, children (both girls and boys, especially younger ones,) expressed little understanding of what was happening and its implications for them. Time since separation played a role in shaping children's understanding. This will be shown later in the chapter.

Six pointed out that their mothers told them in detail about everything that was happening and why. They said they had adequate understanding and this helped them to cope. Previous research (cf. Walczak and Burns, 1984; Cockett and Tripp, 1994) has also shown that the more understanding children have about divorce, the better they can cope with it. Some perceived the explanations as brief and inadequate. They said they were told that their fathers had left the families to stay with other women, or violence caused the separation. Others were given no explanations at all.

Some children and their mothers had shared explanations of the separation, but the level of these shared understandings was different. This is because most children who attributed separation to violence; pointed out that they did not know of the circumstances that led to the violence, while mothers on the other hand knew in detail the causes of the violence. This shows that the extent to which communication is important to people's understandings of situations / experiences is limited.

Constructing an understanding is not only influenced by what one is told, but is also influenced by negotiations that take place among people. Backett (1980) and Dallos (1995) referred to parents as participants in the construction of understanding, not children because their studies used parents as respondents. An analysis of both children and mothers' accounts show that negotiations rarely took place in a majority of families in this study, but communication was of the top-down nature. The absence of negotiations between children and mothers can be explained in terms of the images that mothers held of children that have been discussed earlier in this



chapter. The absence of negotiations to some extent created difficulties in children's efforts to understand the separation.

The process of constructing an understanding does not only depend on what one is told, and negotiations, it also depends on one's observations. Some children created their own perceptions through their observations of family life both in the past and in the present and their interpretations of it. Children who were aware of the unhappiness (especially the conflicts and violence) that prevailed in their families prior to the separation and who wanted their parents to separate generally had better understanding of the separation than their counterparts who were not aware that their parents had problems, and those who, even though they were aware of the problems, did not want the separation or had mixed feelings about it. They reported that they lacked understanding about the implications of divorce for their lives. This shows that understanding the causes of divorce is one thing and understanding about the implications is another.

Children's accounts showed that they were keen and constant observers of parental interactions. They perceived their parents' separation as processes and made connections between events. This was shown by the words of Lizzy, aged 16 who had witnessed parental violence before separation.

*My parents, from my own observation, are two different people. My father is conservative and more of a traditionalist person and my mother is liberal and is quite an assertive woman. She knows her rights. There are certain things, which my father believed a woman should do and should not do which my mother disagrees with. So my mother and father are not compatible. They were always disagreeing on many things, even minor ones, and my father because he was stronger than my mother, would end up beating my mother. It reached a point where my mother could not take it any more.*

Differences were noted in siblings' accounts of their understanding of separation and one factor that accounted for these differences was their perceptions of their relations with fathers. For example, siblings who witnessed violence in the home, but who believed their relations with fathers were good, did not want parents to separate. Therefore, they reported that they felt confused and lacked understanding compared to their counterparts who witnessed violence and also had poor relationships with their fathers.



All the five children who were victims of parental violence pointed out that they understood that separation was caused by violence that was inflicted on both them and their mothers. Kago, a 13-year-old boy for example said:

*....my mother used to say that one day she will leave him because he was making me and her suffer....So when we left Mochudi, it was just after my mother was admitted to hospital because he had beat her severely, so I knew....*

Some children also realised clearly the effects of separation on themselves, their mothers, as well as in the family dynamics at large. Catherine, a 17 year old who had a close relationship with her father prior to separation and whose father had provided the family with adequate financial support throughout the separation period for example, said:

*Separation brought many problems to my family. I felt terrible, sad and frustrated. I didn't believe that dad could leave us and stop taking care of us because he had always done so. My mother also felt very sad. She always hopes that one day my father will come back. We are suffering, we don't have food, clothes, and... (Child cried)*

Children who were not provided with explanations of the separation process, those who were not aware of the problems that existed in their families prior to the separation, as well as those who although they were aware of the problems did not want the separation asserted that they had difficulties in understanding what was going on and sometimes felt confused.

*I thought life was okay in my family. I never saw my parents fighting or arguing. My understanding was and is still very little. I really can't tell what happened and why. I am just confused.... My mother and father are the only ones who know what happened and why. I asked my grandma about why my parents don't stay together, and she said she does not know..... (Khumo, boy aged 10)*

Not only does lack of understanding about divorce hinder children's adjustment, it has also been found to hinder adjustment of adults as well. In their American study of parents' experiences of their adult children's divorce, Hamon and Cobb (1993) found that lack of understanding of the causes of their children's divorce created adjustment difficulties among parents. This shows that both children and adults can be affected in the same way by similar experiences.

Children perceived understanding the separation as an ongoing challenge. It was clear



from children's accounts that their understanding of separation did not take place overnight. As some children were exposed to new information and experiences, their understanding changed. For example,

*My mother told me that my father had other women and he no longer loved her that is why she left him. But after we stopped staying with my dad, I realised that my mother also had other men, and I began to realise that the reason my mother told me was not the correct one. So I now believe that my parents stopped staying together because they did not love each other, both had other people that they loved. (Nonofu, girl, aged 14 who although did not have a close relationship with her father prior to separation did not want her parents to separate).*

*.....I didn't know that because my parents stopped staying together we were not going to have a car in the family. I had always thought that my mother would buy a car, so when she said she did not have money, I became sad. I asked her why she could not borrow the one which dad was using so that she could transport us to school everyday, but she said dad would refuse because they are separated..... I asked her what that meant and she said it meant they were no longer married to each other. If I had known that separation meant not having a car in the home, I would have gone with dad. (Aron, 13 who perceived his pre-separation relationship with his father as very close and had always been treated more favourably by his father than his older brother )*

Similarly, some children expressed different understandings about separation at the time of separation and at the time of the interview ( a few years later).

*Interviewer: What was your understanding of separation at the time when it took place?*

*Grace, aged 21: I had no clue of what was happening. I only saw my mother taking us to live with grandma. I also used to see my dad beating mum, but never thought that would end up in divorce. ....*

*Interviewer: What is your understanding now?*

*Grace: Now, I understand that my mother stopped staying with my father because my father was violent to her. I also understand that my father used to spend all his money in gambling and alcohol and was not taking care of us.*

## **Summary**

The chapter has shown that the process of making sense of parental separation for children was a complex interpretive activity. The accounts provided are not only a set of individualised explanations, they are historically and culturally situated and



contextually grounded. In making sense of separation, children reinterpreted their experiences of family life before the separation, as well as during the separation. Reconstructing and reinterpreting the past, as we have seen, is an essential activity in the process of making sense of separation.

This chapter has shown that factors such as communication about divorce-related circumstances, age, the nature of pre-separation children's relationships with fathers and mothers and time since separation shaped how children made sense of separation. The finding that younger children generally expressed little understanding of separation shows that children's understanding increases with age. Furthermore, the finding that the nature of children's relationships with fathers prior to divorce shaped the way they made sense of separation and coped shows that interventions to these children should take into account the nature of their pre-separation relationships with fathers.

Children and mothers' accounts of communication revealed that mostly they held different beliefs. A majority of children perceived communication that took place with them as inadequate because their questions were not dealt with the way they wanted, explanations provided to them were inadequate and their opinions were not sought. Children who perceived their relationships with fathers before parental separation as close reported that they felt sad and worried about the lack of communication on issues such as future contact with fathers, whether their fathers would continue supporting them financially, lack of advance communication about changes in neighbourhoods and schools and others. Their counterparts who viewed their pre-separation relationships with fathers as not close expressed less concern on issues like continuation of contact with fathers, but they were largely concerned about the implications of separation for their fathers' role as financial providers. Children did not want their parents to respond to their questions angrily, but expected them to be patient. Most mothers on the other hand believed that open communication with young children should not take place because children would be unable to cope with the explanations and / or to understand.

Communication that took place in most families, which participated in the study, was of a top-down nature. This kind of communication implies that some mothers believed children did not have independent opinions. The top-down communication



that was prevalent in many families during the period of separation and after, was not a new phenomenon, it also prevailed prior to the separation. However, prior to separation, almost all children reported it, while during and after separation, children and mothers in six families said there was open communication and children's views were solicited.

Other images that were held by mothers include: images of children as evolving beings who were in the process of growing up; images of children as innocent, passive and submissive, and images of children's basic needs as more important than social and psychological ones. Most mothers in this study failed to recognise the children's needs for explanations and to acknowledge their capacity to understand and cope and this created problems for children. Children felt sad, upset, confused and neglected. It should be acknowledged that mothers' ability to provide informational support to children was not only hampered by the images they held of children, but also by the divorce related economic and emotional distress they underwent. A detailed discussion of this issue will be provided in chapter eight and nine. This shows that children and mothers' experiences are closely related, and as such measures to improve children's adjustment to divorce should not only focus on children, but also on mothers.

It should be noted that although separation was the main event that children experienced, it was preceded and / or followed by other events; for example, residential moves, violence, economic hardships, changes in schools, changes in relationships with parents and separation from siblings. The next chapter will explore how separation from a parent and some of the above separation-related experiences affected children's emotions and behaviour.

## CHAPTER 7

### Emotional and Behavioural Effects of Separation on Children

Little is known about how children in Botswana react to their parents' divorce. Most studies in this area have been conducted in western countries and are therefore not necessarily relevant to a developing country. This chapter examines children and mothers' perceptions of how separation and related experiences affected children's emotions and behaviour. Perceived emotional effects of divorce on mothers will be referred to only in relation to their impact on children. Although parental separation was the main event considered in this study, it was accompanied by experiences such as changes in families' economic resources, changes in relations with family and social network members, as well as changes of neighbourhoods and schools. Parental separation is therefore not just one event, but part of a set of changes that unfold over time.

Respondents interpreted children's emotional and behavioural reactions to separation by drawing on their experiences of home life prior to the separation. The process of attaching meanings to separation and related events was therefore an interpretive rather than an 'objective' one. Hence children and mothers' perceptions of the emotional and behavioural impact are products of an interpretive process. Meanings children attached to separation were diverse and consequently their responses varied. An analysis of respondents' accounts shows that attaching meanings to separation and related changes was not an easy straightforward process, but was fluid and complex. This in turn created complex and mixed responses. The responses were mixed because some events were reported to have provoked both positive and negative feelings among children.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on children's emotional reactions to their fathers' departure from the homes. The second part focuses on how children reacted to secondary changes / events. Lastly, attention is paid to the perceived effects of children's emotional reactions on their behaviour.



## ***Children's emotional reactions to the absence of their fathers***

An analysis of children's accounts showed that gender did not influence children's feelings towards the absence of their fathers from the homes. However factors such as age, time since parental physical separation, the existence of violence prior to parental physical separation as well as children's perceptions of their relationships with fathers during the pre-separation period played a role in shaping children's feelings. Sibling differences were noted among children's reports of their feelings.

### **Relief**

One third of children in the study expressed feelings of relief as a result of their fathers' absence from the homes. These feelings were largely expressed by older children (i.e. between 14 and 21) particularly those who perceived their relationships with fathers prior to the separation as not close partly because of the violence that was prevalent in their families. Children's feelings of relief emanated from their view of their fathers' absence as a sign of the end of violence. These children perceived violence in the home as more stressful than other experiences.

*Interviewer: Could you list four best things that happened to you during the past four years?*

*Daisy, aged 14 whose parents separated two and a half years prior the time of the interview: Only one thing readily comes to my mind. It is my parents' separation. It was the best thing that happened to me because there is now peace in the home. I am happy. Umm, oh, my success in standard 7 examinations was another best thing that happened to me in the past four years.*

*Interviewer: How about four worst things?*

*Daisy: When I saw my mother beaten.*

*Interviewer: Are there any other worst things that had happened to you?*

*Daisy: No, I can't remember any. I remembered one thing. When my uncle died last year, I felt very sad.*

With this vocabulary, children are making a connection between what life was like for them during the time when their families were still intact and what life was like after separation. As they understand it, their parents' marriage was a trauma, it made them and their mothers suffer and its end brought freedom.



Although Daisy expressed feelings of relief as a result of her father's absence from the home, her younger brother aged 11, felt sad about it. Daisy's sibling revealed during the interview that his relationship with his father was good, that he missed him very much and felt sad about his absence as shown by the following exchange between him and the interviewer.

*Interviewer: What are the most important effects of your parents' divorce for you?*

*Daisy's sibling, a boy aged 11 : It is that I miss my father. I love him very much and I would like to stay with him. I am sad because he is not staying with us anymore.....I wish one day he could stay with us.....*

Some children's interpretations of their fathers' departures from the homes were not static, but changed as time went on. According to two children, they initially believed that separation meant the end of violence in the home and felt happy, but were disappointed to realise that their mothers experienced more severe violence afterwards. Children did not have much awareness of the causes of increased violence, but mothers did. They reported that the violence emanated from their ex-husbands' jealous behaviour. One mother said her ex-husband became more violent because he suspected that she had a boyfriend. The other said her ex-husband did not want her to leave the marital home, but to continue to stay with him even though they were divorced. Children reported that the violence made them feel sad about the separation. Children's continued exposure to violence after divorce contradicts commonly held beliefs that separation ends violence.

Similarly, one child and her sibling who perceived their relationship with their fathers both prior to and after separation as not close reported that initially they felt happy about the separation, but as time went on, they felt sad because of their father's establishment of contact with their mother on a frequent basis and worried that they might become reconciled.

*I am still bitter at him for the violence he used to inflict on my mother. I don't want to have contact with him. Since we stopped staying with him, our relationship with our mother has improved a lot. When he was staying with us, he used to criticize my mother saying she was spoiling us when she involved us in certain things...There was always tension in the house. What makes me more sad is that my mother does not mind having frequent contact with him. In fact it looks like they want to reconcile. I don't want that to happen.....I know that once he starts staying with us, he will start to be violent to my mother again and will not treat us nicely just like he had done before..... (Lizzy, aged 16, whose experience of parental separation was between*



*one and two years from the time of the interview)*

Lizzy's story shows how the re-establishment of contact with a parent with whom children still feel angry can contribute to children's negative emotions.

More mothers than children reported that their children felt relieved about their fathers' absence from homes. They linked children's feelings to the end of violence.

*All my children wanted me to move out of that home. I did not ask them, but I knew what they were thinking of because no child wants his / her mother to be verbally and physically assaulted for nothing.....*

*He felt just okay about it. He was tired of seeing his parents fighting all the time....*

### Sadness / Loss

The foregoing discussion has shown that several children perceived their fathers' departure from the homes as beneficial because it ended violence and therefore they felt relieved. However, not all children felt relieved, others (one-third) expressed feelings of sadness / loss, anger and rejection. This group largely consisted of younger children as well as children who perceived their relationships with fathers before the separation as close. Time since separation did not influence the former's feelings because children in the group had experienced separation from less than one year prior to the time of the interview to up to four years. This shows that the close relationships they had with their fathers was the most important factor that shaped their feelings. It also shows that feelings of sadness for children who believed they had good relations with their fathers can be long lasting.

The way children made sense of loss was varied. This in turn shaped their emotional reactions. Children who perceived their relationships with their fathers as close before separation pointed out that they felt sad about the loss of daily contact with their fathers. They believed their fathers still loved them even though they no longer stayed with them. They missed their fathers intensely and hoped for reconciliation.

*Interviewer: Could you tell me what your father's absence from the home means to you?*

*Maria, aged 16 whose parents separated about two and a half years from the period of the interviews: Ah, I don't know what it means. What I only know is that my father*



*loves me and my sister even if he is not staying with us. I mean he used to do many good things for us. I believe one day he will come back because I know he loves us. I don't believe he has gone forever.*

*Interviewer: How did you feel when your father stopped staying with you?*

*Maria: ..... After my father left us, my sister and me felt very sad. I will speak on my behalf and on behalf of my sister because I know my younger sister has also been affected. She is not going to be able to speak for herself clearly as she is young, so I will speak on her behalf...: .....We missed dad a lot, and we still miss him. He was good to us, and he used to play with us and read stories for us. Our mother does not allow us to visit dad at his place of work, she says that it is him who is supposed to come and see us. We used to cry a lot. These days we no longer cry, but we still feel very sad. We were closer to him than we are to my mother. We know he loves us, but we just don't understand why he cannot come to stay with us. Maybe my mother knows, I don't know. We just hope that one day he will come back to stay with us. ....*

Implicit in Maria's account are several messages. Firstly, it shows that she held an image of her father as personally caring and as such missed the care she used to receive from him. Secondly, it shows that by taking the initiative to request her mother to allow her to visit her father, the child was an active agent. She and her sister longed for their father and tried to take action to deal with this though their actions were blocked by their mother who believed it was their father who was supposed to visit them. This situation indicates that the actions and attitudes of custodial parents can frustrate children who are already distressed because of their fathers' absence. Thirdly, the mother failed to recognise children's need to continue contact with their father. She revealed during the interview that separation was not a major concern to her, she was more concerned about other issues. Her un-supportive attitude towards children's contact with their father indicates that she interpreted children's reaction in terms of her own understanding and experiences.

Maria's account above is fascinating because she not only spoke for herself, but for her sister as well. She was one of the few children who spoke for a sibling as well as on her own behalf. But she was the only child in the study who explicitly noted that her younger sibling did not have the capacity to articulate her feelings because of her age. This belief is striking because it is similar to that which was held by most mothers in this study, which they used to justify their actions of not communicating openly with children about separation.

The findings of this study reinforce the point that children's experiences of growing



up in the same families are not always the same. For example, not all siblings interviewed held similar feelings about the departure of fathers from households. Siblings from six out of ten families had different feelings. These feelings emanated from the different relationships that they had with fathers. The following two stories of siblings clearly show this point

*My father was good to me. I am the eldest child in the family, so he used to give me money to buy things for children in the home. Sometimes he sent me to pay for bills. He gave me many responsibilities, and my mother did not like it. She said, my father was treating me like an adult. I liked performing those duties, because usually when I came home with some change my father would tell me to keep it..... My father used to help me with my schoolwork, compared to my mother..... So I really miss him, and I feel sad that he is not staying with us. (Malebogo, girl aged 14 whose parents separated 3 years prior to the interview)*

The sibling of Malebogo on the other hand held positive feelings about father absence.

*My relationship with my father had never been close. He used to beat my mother and sometimes he beat me. He did not beat my other siblings, I don't know why. So I am happy that he is no longer staying with us.*

Children's feelings of sadness not only emanated from the loss of their daily contact with fathers, but they also felt sad because of the loss of the images they held about their parents' marriages. These images partly emanated from children's religious beliefs. The exchange below between the interviewer and Kagiso, a girl aged 21 whose experience of parental separation was 4 years prior to the time of the interview and who perceived his relationship with his father prior to separation as neutral not only shows how religious beliefs influenced children's feelings of sadness, but also shows that the feelings subsided with time:

*It made me sad. I was worried about what people will say about my parents because the church does not allow divorce. I have always heard the priest saying that marriage is meant to last forever. I believed those words because the Bible says only death should make married people to stop staying together....*

*Interviewer: How do you feel now about your parents' separation?*

*Kagiso: Now, I don't feel very sad about it like in the past. But sometimes when I need something and my mother tells me that she does not have money, I become sad and wish that my father was still living with us. Children who stay with their fathers wear better clothes than us who don't have fathers. Life is not nice, but I know there is nothing that I can do to bring him back.....*



Children's feelings of loss also emanated from their view of their fathers' absence from the homes as a sign of diminished interest in them. Two of the children who perceived their relationships with fathers as close prior to separation expressed this view. These feelings are not only peculiar to children in this study, children in previous studies (cf. Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Mitchell, 1985) have also expressed them.

*My father just stopped staying with us. He did not tell me anything (Daphne, aged 10 who perceived her relationship with her father prior to separation as close)*

*Interviewer: What does his departure mean to you?*

*It means he does not care about us as he used to in the past.*

Daphne's experience of father absence was quite recent (less than a year prior to the interview), therefore it is not surprising that she felt both sad and believed her father did not care about her. Probably, with the passage of time as she adjusts to the divorce process, her feelings might subside.

For some children, their feelings of sadness emanated from their view of fathers' absence from the homes as a loss of the structure, support and a sense of stability and security that their families had provided them with. Children grieved for the absent fathers even though they perceived their relationships with them as not close prior to the separation. Children therefore had difficulties in entering into a life, which they were not familiar with and felt sad about the collapse of a familiar family. However, the children's words show these feelings became less intense over time.

*Interviewer: How did you feel when your parents were separating?*

*Nonofo, girl aged 14 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview: It was painful. I felt very sad that my parents' marriage had come to an end. Although my relationship with my father was not as close as it should have been, I did not want my parents to stop staying together. I was used to staying with mum and dad, and that was the only life I knew.*

*Interviewer: How do you feel now about the absence of your father from the home?*

*Nonofo: A bit better...*

Others felt sad about their fathers' absence because it meant their families'



diminished economic well being. Implicit in this meaning that children attached to their fathers' departures is the image of fathers as financially stabilising. Children worried and felt sad that because their mothers were not working or earning low wages, they were going to suffer economically. Their worries on this issue were well founded.

*.....I know some children at school whose fathers are not staying with them. They are also not taking care of them. They are suffering. So when my parents stopped staying together, I felt sad because I suspected that my father was no longer going to take care of us. Indeed he is not, and we are suffering..... (Catherine, aged 17 who experienced parental separation a year prior to the interview, and who perceived his relationship with her father prior to the separation as close, but not close after separation).*

This quote shows that a child's interaction with social network members (in this case peers) can shape his/ her expectations. The child and her mother were the only ones in the study who reported receiving regular / monthly court ordered child support payments. Others reported either receiving no payments or irregular payments. Although the child knew that her father was paying regularly, she believed that he was not taking care of them. This belief according to the child partly emanated from her comparison of the economic situation of her family before and after separation.

A few children associated the sad feelings that resulted from the loss of their fathers with their mothers' depression. They felt sad because they worried about their mothers' future. The depressed mothers occupied children's minds. Children worried as to whether their mothers would cope on their own. This shows that the effects of separation on the mother was passed down to the child. Some took steps to discuss their mothers' emotions with them.

*I realised after dad stopped staying with us that mum was worried. I think she did not want dad to leave. I was also worried that dad had left us, so I thought it would help if me and mum talked about it. So one day, I asked mum why she was quiet most of the time, and she said it is because she had frequent headaches. I asked her to give me money to buy pills for her. She gave me the money, and when I came back from the shop hoping to continue talking about the separation with her, I realised that she had been crying. So I did not continue talking about it..... I worry about her because she is not as jolly as she used to be before my father stopped staying with us. One day, I will talk to her ..... (Aron, boy aged 13)*

Two children (a boy and a girl) who believed their mothers caused the divorce and who had close relationships with their fathers on the other hand worried about the



whereabouts of their fathers, and how they were living, as well as how they were coping. These worries preoccupied children's minds particularly when they did not have adequate information about where their fathers were staying and whether they were not feeling lonely.

*My father, I think left the home because he was not happy. My mother had disappointed him by continuing to see the man she was seeing. My father did his best to stop mum from doing so, but my mother just continued. So I sometimes wonder how my father is living and with whom. Because if he is staying alone, he must be feeling very sad and lonely because he misses us. I just hope he has found somebody to stay with so that he does not feel lonely. (Malebogo, girl aged 14 whose experience of separation was 3 years prior to the time of the interview)*

Several mothers in this study said they were not aware of their children's feelings of sadness. This is probably because most children had a tendency to keep feelings to themselves. Similarly, it was uncommon for mothers to ask children how they felt. Only about four (mothers who perceived children's relationships with fathers prior to the divorce as close) pointed out that their children felt sad about their fathers' absence from the homes.

*My child felt sad at the time of the separation. He did not want it to happen at all. He wanted mum and dad to continue staying together. He was very close to his father. I don't think he gained anything from the separation. It was a loss to him. He lost his father's love and attention. .*

## Rejection

Two boys who perceived their relationships with fathers before divorce as not close expressed feelings of rejection. One of the two children felt rejected because of his 'bad' relationship with his mother ( as manifested by his mother's attitude towards him) combined with his father's absence from the home. He therefore felt rejected by both parents.

*As I told you earlier, my relationship with my mother is terrible. Although I did not have a close relationship with my father either, it was not as bad as that with my mother. Since my father left, my relationship with my mother has continued to be the same as before his departure. Sometimes I believe it is now worse. I feel my parents have rejected me, and I don't understand why they brought me into this world then.....(child cried).....(Kabelo, boy aged 19 whose parents separated four years prior to the interview ).*

The other child who felt rejected attributed his feelings to witnessing his father chase



him, his mother and sibling out of the home. However, his feelings subsided with time, as shown below.

*At the time when my father chased us away from his home, I felt terrible. I felt very bad..... I felt like he was neglecting and disowning us. I lost all the confidence and trust that I had on him. Now I feel much better because mum is working and she takes good care of us. I mean the kind of life we live is much better than the one we lived when before my parents stopped staying together (Joseph, aged 13 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview)*

A comparison of Kabelo and Joseph's accounts show some differences. Kabelo reported that his relationship with his mother before separation was not close and did not improve after separation. Joseph, on the other hand, said he had a close relationship with his mother and his mother continued to take good care of him after separation. One can therefore surmise from these two accounts that children whose relationships with their custodial parents continue to be distant after separation are more likely to perceive themselves as feeling rejected for a longer time than their counterparts who continue to have close relationships with custodial parents after separation. This hypothesis would need to be tested with a larger sample.

### Mixed feelings

Positive and negative feelings are not mutually exclusive. A third of the children reported that they had mixed feelings about their parents' separation. Children in this group were those who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as mixed or 'just neutral'. This group consisted of older boys and girls. They pointed out that separation brought some gains and losses for them. The mixed feelings largely stemmed from the fact that they did not want their mothers to live unhappy lives (because of being beaten), while at the same time they wanted their fathers to continue staying with them.

*Interviewer: How did you feel when your parents stopped staying together?*

*Kabelo, boy aged 19: I don't know really. Ummm, at first I was just confused as I did not know what was happening. But after my grandma told me, I just felt in between. I mean I was not happy that they had stopped staying together, but I also did not like it when my father beat my mother. ...*

In expressing her mixed feelings about father absence, another child had this to say:



*I miss my father, but when he was here it was not nice because he used to beat my mother and my mother became very sad and I became sad as well. I couldn't concentrate well at school when I thought about life at home, now it is better, I can concentrate, but the only problem is that I miss my father....( Thato, girl aged 17, whose parents stopped staying together about 3 years prior to the period of the interviews )*

Some children's mixed reactions to their parents' separation, however, were not static, but changed after some time, particularly when they were exposed to new experiences which they perceived either as more stressful (than the violence that their fathers imposed on their mothers) or less stressful.

*We were still children, therefore we needed our father's love and protection. After the separation, I sometimes missed his presence and fatherly love as I no longer saw him every day. I just saw him by chance. I felt sad about it. But at the same time, I did not like it when he beat my mother. I was really torn apart, because he liked to be nice to us, but not our mother..... These days I don't miss him as I am now mature. When I was young that is when I really had problems accepting that my parents are no longer staying together, but now I am okay.... (Andrew, aged 18 whose experience of parental separation was four years prior to the interview).*

The discussion on children's feelings towards father absence so far has shown that the feelings were diverse. Factors such as age, time since separation, the prevalence of violence in the home prior to separation as well as children's perceptions of their relationships with father during the pre-separation period shaped how children felt about father absence. Because father absence was accompanied by other changes in children's lives, the next section focuses on children's feelings towards such changes.

### ***Children's emotional reactions to secondary changes / events***

Departure of fathers from the homes was not the only change that children were exposed to. Children also experienced changes of schools and neighbourhoods as a result of parental separation.

#### **Reactions to changes of schools**

Two out of the nine children who changed schools after separation perceived the changes as positive. The children's words indicate that they valued the establishment of friends and the absence of corporal punishment in their new schools. Children felt happy as a result.



*I don't mind this school. I have good friends. I felt a bit lost during the first few days, but now I am okay (Katlego, girl aged 17 whose parents separated 4 years prior to the interview)*

*My teacher is good, she does not beat us. The one who taught me at my old school used to beat us and I did not like it. (Khumo, boy aged 10 whose parents separated a year prior to the interview)*

The remaining seven children interpreted the changes in schools in negative terms. Some of them associated the changes with a deterioration in their educational performance, while others associated them with loss of friends. Consequently, they felt sad.

*The school I go to is not nice. The children, I don't know how they are. They are not very friendly. I only have one friend, but in the school I attended in the past, I had many friends. (Daisy, aged 14 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview)*

Daisy is one of the children who expressed feelings of relief as a result of her father's absence from the home. Her words above, however show that she did not hold positive feelings about changes in schools. The different feelings she held about her divorce related experiences therefore indicate that divorce is a process that can provoke both positive and negative feelings among children.

Kago, a boy aged 13 who was a victim of violence also expressed negative views about the changes in schools that he experienced.

*It was only a few weeks before I wrote standard 7 examinations, when we left. We ran away because my father always beat my mother. So I wrote the examinations in a new school, and that was not good. I got a C grade.*

Although Kago associated his poor performance in examinations to the change in schools that he experienced, it might not be the only factor that contributed to his poor performance. Experiences such as being both a witness and a victim of parental violence prior to the divorce might have made it difficult for him to perform well.

Children who changed schools more than once were much more negative about the moves than those who changed only once.

*.....I can't remember how many times I changed schools. What I know is that it is more than four times because every time we changed neighbourhoods, I changed*



*schools. I did not like it all. I was always a stranger in the schools I attended. I always found it difficult to catch up with others, I mean everything was always new and difficult for me. I performed poorly, even in the form 5 examinations.....  
.....(Kabelo, boy aged 19 who did not have a close relationship with both his parents and was both a witness and a victim of parental violence )*

### Reactions to changes in neighbourhoods

Previous studies have shown that children in maternal custody quite often move to poorer neighbourhoods following parental separation. South and colleagues (1998) have linked this trend to the families' decline in income engendered by the departure of the father who in most cases had a higher earning capacity than the mother. Although most children in this study changed neighbourhoods for the reason given by South and colleagues, it was not the only reason that made children change neighbourhoods. Some changed neighbourhoods because their mothers were fleeing from violent partners. Children assigned various meanings to changes in neighbourhoods and these influenced their emotional reactions. A closer analysis of children's accounts of their reactions to residential mobility shows that their feelings did not vary according to age, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, the nature of pre-divorce children's relationships with fathers, and time since divorce. All children who moved (except two) expressed feelings of regret towards the moves. The absence of major differences in children's accounts of their feelings towards changes in neighbourhoods can be related to the fact that almost all children in the study moved from either high-class to medium class neighbourhoods, medium to low class neighbourhoods or low class to very low class neighbourhoods.

### *Regret*

Most children who changed neighbourhoods regretted the change. These feelings emanated from their perceptions of the places they moved to as of low status compared to the ones they lived in before the separation.

*I don't like this neighbourhood. It is congested. About five families live in this yard. Although each family has its own house, there is little space for us to play. There are no playing facilities in this neighbourhood. In Mogoditshane, there were swimming pools, and other nice playing facilities. This yard is dirty and my mother is always afraid that we might end up contracting some diseases.....I really don't like it here and I feel sad that we moved from Mogoditshane.(Daisy, aged 14, whose parents separated two and a half years prior to the interview)*

*It is not nice here. The area is dirty, people here sell and drink alcohol and it is*



*noisy. I don't like it. (Moemedi, boy, aged 12)*

Children's negative feelings towards changes in neighbourhoods were not only influenced by their low status, they were also influenced by the different lifestyles of the neighbourhoods. This was evidenced by the words of one of the children who moved from an urban to a rural area as a result of her parents' separation.

*I am not used to fetching water, firewood, and cooking. My mother used to do the cooking for us, now I have to help my sister to cook for my siblings and for my grandma. These things are difficult. .... (Peter, aged 12 whose parents separated between one and two years prior to the interview)*

Peter's contention that he had difficulties in adjusting to rural life should be understood in relation to information presented in the previous chapter which showed that before separation, most children in the study lived with their parents in urban areas and spent little time if any in rural areas. Furthermore, economic, social and cultural differences between the type of life Peter lived in town and that which he lived in the rural area may have adversely affected his adjustment. In addition, Peter's reaction to changes of neighbourhoods (i.e, moving to a rural area) should be understood in the context of the 'comfortable' life he had when he was staying with his father. Peter himself, his mother and his sibling revealed earlier in the interview that Peter was treated much more favourably by his father than his siblings, and he had a very close relationship with him. The gap between the pre-divorce experiences and the post-divorce ones no doubt can complicate a child adjustment to divorce.

Coleman (1990) and Hagan et al (1996) have pointed out the link between residential mobility and children's adjustment. According to these authors, residential mobility adversely affects the 'social capital' available to children and adolescents. Social capital 'consists of connections between actors that inhere in family relations and in community organizations and that are useful for the cognitive and social development of a child' (Coleman, 1990: 300). Family, friends, peers, neighbours and community groups can provide children with support that can ease their adjustment. Changes of neighbourhoods quite often cuts children's ties with friends and children tend to perceive this in negative terms.

Coleman and Hagan et al's finding on how changes of neighbourhoods affects children's social capital has been confirmed by this study. Most children in this



study, for example, perceived the neighbourhood changes as having had adverse effects on their friendships. They regretted the changes in neighbourhoods because it created instabilities in their relationships with peers and friends. It also led to loss of contact and support from friends. They lamented that they had not established friendships in the neighbourhoods they moved to, felt isolated and had difficulties in adjusting.

*I don't have friends here. I miss my friends whom I left in the place we lived when my parents were still together. I don't have anyone to play with.... (Aron, aged 13 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview)*

As noted above, Aron's parents had separated between two and three years prior to the interview. Ideally, this period is long enough for Aron to have established friendships relationships in the neighbourhood. His account that he did not have friends may therefore stem from his overall sad feelings about father absence and the separation process as a whole, particularly that he had a very close relationship with his father prior to separation. Although, the relationship continued to be close after separation, it was not as close as before separation as his contact with his father was only on a part-time basis. Contrary to Aron's account that he did not have friends in the new neighbourhood, his sibling, a boy aged 16 whose relationship with his father was not close at all prior to separation said he had friends in the neighbourhood. These differences in siblings' accounts show that the ability of siblings to establish friendships vary. The differences may also stem from the possibility that Aron's sibling sought social support more from friends as his relationship with his father was poor, whereas Aron relied more for social support from his father.

Some children's difficulties in adjusting to new neighbourhoods were not only exacerbated by lack of support from friends, but also by lack of parental support. Their fathers were uninvolved, while their mothers were not supportive. Most mothers did not communicate with children about the moves in advance, nor did they provide the necessary emotional support to children. Lack of communication in advance about the changes parallels the whole picture of parent-child communication about separation. Children and mothers' accounts were consistent about the lack of advance communication with children about the moves. Some mothers pointed out that they were too immersed in their own emotional problems and failed to recognize that children needed their support. These circumstances exacerbated children's



adjustment difficulties.

*.....You know when you are distressed, you cannot be able to communicate openly with other people, especially children. As I told you earlier, I was very sad about the end of my marriage and because of this, I did not have time to talk openly and freely with my children about any of the things associated to the divorce.....*

Hagan and colleagues (1996), in their study of one suburb of Toronto also found that family migration more adversely affects children who live in families with uninvolved fathers and unsupportive mothers.

It should be noted that at the time of the study, most children were still adjusting to divorce and related changes. It is possible that with the passage of time, some children may be able to establish friends, leading to fewer difficulties in adjustment.

### *Relief / Happiness*

Only one child expressed feelings of relief as a result of changes in neighbourhoods. The child moved from an urban to a rural area. She felt comfortable and happy about the move, and attributed these feelings to her preference to stay in a rural area because there were few differences between children from high socio-economic backgrounds and those from low ones in rural areas.

*Life here is just fine. I like it here because we (children in the village) just look the same. In towns when your mother does not have enough money, people can easily tell by your appearance and your clothes, but here they can't. So I feel more comfortable staying here than in town. (Katlego, girl aged 17 whose parents separated 4 years prior to the interview)*

### *No feelings*

One child and her sibling reported that they had no feelings about the changes in neighbourhoods.

*Lizzy, aged 16: The changes of neighbourhoods did not affect me. To me, it doesn't matter whether I stay in a big house or not. As long as I have a shelter to sleep is what matters to me. We used to live in a big house, and other houses in the neighbourhood were big as well. Now we live in a flat. It is smaller than the house we lived in before my parents separated. But at least there is water, electricity and a telephone.*

*Interviewer: Is there anything you miss from the neighbourhood you lived in before*

*your parents stopped staying together?*

*Lizzy: No, there is nothing that I miss.*

Lizzy 's sibling was a girl aged 14. According to her, Lizzy and their mother, the two girls had a close relationship. Therefore most of their opinions were similar. Their mother however, had the feeling that Lizzy tended to influence her sister's thoughts to a large extent as she was older and much more assertive than her sibling.

### ***Effects on behaviour***

According to Hayes (1981), people's emotions / feelings affect their behaviour. Because feelings quite often affect people's behaviours, this section focuses on how children's feelings about divorce affected their behaviour. Some children and their mothers pointed out that children's feelings about the separation of their parents and related events led to changes in children's behaviour.

#### **Maturity**

A few older children (both boys and girls) pointed out that their fathers' absence from the homes led to an improvement in their relationships with their mothers as the latter involved them in helping with decisions. Children in this group were mainly those who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as either 'just neutral' or not close at all. They perceived their mothers' involvement in decisions with their maturity.

*My father's absence from the home made my relationship with my mother to be close. I mean my mother involves me in making family decisions and I help her a lot with many things.... She quite often sends me to pay for bills and other things. I am doing things that I did not do before and this makes me mature and independent..... I am happy with life in the family now. (Lizzy, girl aged 16)*

Mature behaviour among children not only resulted from children helping their mothers with decisions, it also resulted from the emotional support that a few children provided to their mothers.

*Me and my mother are now closer to each other than when my father was still staying with us. When something worries her, she tells me and I advise her. I feel I am maturing fast because I help my mother a lot. (Daisy, aged 14)*



Daisy's mother however had mixed feelings about confiding on her child.

*I know I should not be telling her some things that I tell her, but I don't have a choice. Since her father left us, she has grown so fast, she shows much concern for me, and most of time when she thinks I am sad, she asks me what worries me, and then I end up telling her.....*

Parental separation also impacted on children's behaviour because it resulted in changes in some children's roles and responsibilities. Five mothers reported that their children played a more vital role in helping them with household duties as well as taking care of their younger siblings. Their children confirmed their mothers' accounts. Children assumed more roles and responsibilities particularly in some families where mothers engaged in hectic work schedules.

*....I mean when I was at secondary school, I used to come home and look for something to eat and there would be nothing that was cooked. I started to learn how to cook because my mother worked as a maid and she used to come home very late in the evening. Now I can cook food that even yourself can eat.....Look outside, you see those bricks. My brother and I make them so that we can build a house for my mother. This house that we are staying in does not belong to my mother. It belongs to her sister. I am used to being the head of the family and would not like my father or any man to come and try to control what is happening in the family..... (Andrew, aged 18)*

Children also assumed new roles and responsibilities in families which reported that separation led to improvements in mother-daughter relationships and those which had hired maids during the years when their families were intact. Children and mothers revealed that maids used to perform almost all the duties in the house, and after separation because there was no longer enough money to hire maids, they stayed without them. These adolescents initially had difficulties in performing the chores that they never performed before, but as time went on, they got accustomed to doing them. Their skills improved and they felt they matured faster.

*Interviewer: What do you think you have benefited from your parents' separation?*

*Grace, aged 21: I think separation has made me to be more mature. Now I am able to do things that I was not able to do before. When dad was staying with us, there were always maids around who did all those things..... (Grace, aged 21)*

Although some children perceived the increased responsibilities in a positive way, a few (four) did not. These children moved to rural areas after separation and had to adjust to doing chores they had not done before, such as fetching water, cooking and



fetching firewood. The children's views of increased responsibilities in a negative manner was exacerbated by the fact that they were separated from their mothers and lacked their support. Their mothers were aware of the difficulties the children had, but pointed out that they had no choice as they had to continue working in town so that they could earn money to buy food and clothes for the children.

The theme of maturity in respondents' accounts of children's post-divorce experiences did not feature in their accounts of the pre-separation experiences. One reason that accounts for this variation is the rigid boundaries and communication styles that characterised many families during the pre-separation period. In families that have rigid boundaries and communication styles, parents' images of children as incapable of performing certain duties in the family and / or having independent opinions are strong and these limit children's ability to display mature behaviour.

The link between divorce and children's maturity is not new, it has also been established by previous researchers in this area (cf. Weiss, 1979). In his American study of adolescents and divorce, Weiss found that separation led to most children in his sample assuming more roles and responsibilities. The adolescents' parents generally perceived their children's involvement in more roles and responsibilities as beneficial to children as it made them mature and responsible. However, some adolescents in Weiss's study saw their involvement in more responsibilities as of mixed value, as they made them share their parents' worries. Although children's performance of increased roles and responsibilities can be seen as an opportunity to make them mature, it could also be seen as a burden to them.

### Lessons Learned

Although mothers generally expressed little awareness of lessons that their children had learned from their separation, several older boys and girls who felt relieved by their parents' separation as it ended violence as well as those who perceived their relationships with fathers as poor reported that their parents' separation taught them some lessons which would shape their behaviour in future. For example, it made them think of how they were going to avoid repeating the mistakes that their parents had made when they were adults themselves. When asked what they learnt from their parents' separation, for example some children said:



*I have learned that if married people no longer love each other, they should stop staying together because violence is not good for anyone. When I am a parent myself, I will love my children. I will not talk to them angrily most of the time as my father did to us because it will make them feel bad about themselves..... (Kamogelo, boy aged 18 whose parents separated 3 years prior to the interview)*

*I have learned that a woman should not solely rely on her husband for economic survival because marriage can end at any time. Instead, it is important for a woman or a girl who is still attending school like me to work hard at school so that she can live a comfortable life even if the man does not support him. I am going to work hard at school so that I do not rely only on the man who is going to marry me for survival. (Katlego, girl aged 17 whose parents separated 4 years prior to the time of the interview )*

Andrew, an 18-year-old had the following words to say when talking about the lessons he learned from his parents' separation.

*I have learned that separation can create problems for children, especially if they are not able to accept it like I had accepted it. When I am married, I will be a faithful husband to my wife, and children. I will teach my family the word of God because a family that knows God will avoid doing what my father did.*

*Interviewer: What advice would you give to children whose parents are separated?*

*Andrew: I would refer them to Psalm 27, verse 10, which reads 'When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take up'. This verse is one of the things that gave courage. I will also tell the child whose parents are separated that if your parents are separated, it is not the end of the life, life has to continue, and as long as you trust in God, he will take care of you. Besides referring him / her to the word of God, I can tell him / her to do the best she can to make ends meet. I worked piece jobs to find money to buy school uniform because my mother was working as a housemaid and was earning very low wages. I can also advise the child to remember that there are many children whose parents have divorced, so she should not feel very bad about her parents' separation. Lastly, I will tell her to look back and think what was the main cause of her parents' separation, and compare life for herself and mother after separation with that before separation. Because in that way, she can be in a better position to accept the situation.*

In explaining the lessons he learned from parental separation, another teenager said

*.....As I told you earlier, divorce did not make me sad as such, but what made me very sad was that we were not given the house. My father was given the house by the court. I became very sad when I realised that we have lost a place to live in. I learned a lesson that I should work hard at school so that I can pass and live a better life because the things that parents acquire do not belong to children. Like I said, I am now training to be a nurse and I know that I am going to pass..... (Antony, aged 19)*



His mother confirmed Antony's account.

*He is serious about life, he is a hard worker unlike my other children. I wish all of them were like him... ..He always tells me that he does not want to suffer when he is an adult .....because if one is not educated, he cannot live a better life.....*

With the absence of income from a second parent in the home, a few children reported that they began to appreciate that their mothers were doing the best they could to make them and their siblings live better lives. They revealed that their view of money and material things changed after the separation and as a result they placed fewer demands on their mothers.

*.....Separation has also made me to appreciate that my mother is doing her best to make us live comfortably. When I need something and she tells me that she does not have money, I understand and do not persist because I know she means it.(Lizzy, aged 16)*

### Behaviour Problems

Not all mothers reported improvements in children's behaviours, three reported that their children exhibited behaviour problems just prior to separation when their fathers began to spend less and less time in the homes and this behaviour continued to the post-divorce period. Usually in these cases, children's fathers had played a vital role in disciplining them during the years when the families were intact and their departure from the homes made children believe that their mothers would not discipline them. Some mothers reported that children started to come home late, and / or to spend most of the time outside the home.

*These children nowadays misbehave. They think that because their father has gone, there is no one to discipline them. They just do whatever they want. They even go out at night with friends....*

A few mothers reported that after the separation, they became overly concerned that their children should perform well at school particularly that they had 'no fathers', and if they did not perform well, they were going to suffer economically when they were adults. They therefore started to put much pressure on children to work hard and some children apparently resented this.

*Because I am a single parent, I worry a lot about my children's future. I know that if*



*they do not perform well at school, they are going to suffer like me. They don't have a father, so they must take life seriously. I insist that they should study hard..... They do not want to and I get angry with them. Sometimes I beat them..... They have started to spend most of the time outside the home.....*

*.....Since my father left, I don't understand my mother. She likes to talk to us angrily about our schoolwork and I don't like it. She always tells us that if we don't work hard at school, we are going to suffer like she is suffering when we are adults. I don't like it when she beats me. I am tired...so I spend more time with my peers because they talk to me nicely. (Catherine, aged 17).*

These quotations show that separation can influence mothers to put pressure on issues that they did not put pressure on before. This can adversely affect children's relationships with their mothers.

### Poor work at school

A few mothers associated children's poor school performance with their fathers' absence from the homes. They pointed out that children's fathers used to show interest in their schoolwork by helping with homework, for example. After their departure, children lost motivation as they had no one to help them.

*After his father left, there were changes in his school performance. It went down. He had no one to supervise him....*

Children confirmed their mothers' accounts.

*.....My father used to show interest in my schoolwork compared to my mother. He helped me with my schoolwork. ....I liked school and performed better than now. ... (Malebogo, girl aged 14)*

Malebogo and her mother perceived Malebogo's pre-separation relationship with her father as quite close. It is not surprising therefore that Malebogo associated her poor interest in school and performance problems to the absence of her father. Her sibling, a boy aged 11, however who apparently did not have a close relationship with her father and was a victim of parental violence did not relate her school performance to father absence because his father did not show as much interest in his school work as he did in Malebogo's.

Two other children reported that separation led to them failing major examinations. One of the children attributed this trend to the many negative divorce-related

experiences he went through. He did not have a good relationship with any of the parents nor with his siblings, both before and after separation, witnessed violence between parents, and was staying with a stepfather whom he perceived as not loving him.

*When I was attending primary school, I used to perform better at school. The situation changed when my family started having problems. I am not only talking about the fightings between my parents, but many other things that I have already told you about. I mean my school performance went down very much. My whole life was affected. I grew up without friends, I felt bad about myself, and even now my feelings have not disappeared. I hate myself and do not see the reason why I should continue to live....I even tried to commit suicide one time.... (Kabelo, boy aged 19)*

Kabelo's mother however explained the child's poor performance in terms of innate ability rather than the change in family circumstances.

*Interviewer: Has divorce and its related changes that we talked about earlier affected your child in any manner?*

*Mother: No, the child generally is not intelligent, so I can't say it is because of divorce.*

The other child attributed her poor school performance to her stay with a stepmother who mistreated her for a year after the separation. Seven children associated their poor school performance with economic hardships that accompanied divorce. A detailed discussion of this point will be provided in Chapter 8.

Poor work at school is not an experience peculiar to the post-divorce period, as several children and mothers reported it even during the pre-separation period. However, causes of poor work at school varied during the two periods. Prior to separation, several respondents largely associated poor schoolwork with the violence that prevailed in many families, while after separation, it was said to result from absence of supervision from fathers, changes in schools and economic hardship.

## **Summary**

This chapter has discussed children and mothers' perceptions of the emotional and behavioural effects of separation and related experiences on children. Children perceived and interpreted similar experiences differently. These interpretations shaped their reactions. Divorce in the context of this study was conceptualised as a



series of social and environmental changes rather than as a single event. Therefore, children's reactions to it should be seen as largely due to the different changes.

From the discussion of emotional and behavioural effects of divorce and related changes on children, three broad groups of children could be established: a) Children who viewed the effects of both father absence and secondary events (i.e. changes in schools and neighbourhoods) in negative terms; b) Those who believed father absence was beneficial to them as it ended violence in the home, but who viewed secondary changes in negative terms; and c) Those who had mixed feelings about father absence and negative feelings about secondary changes. The chapter has also shown that children and siblings' emotional and behavioural reactions to divorce and related processes were influenced by factors such as perceptions of their relationships with fathers prior to separation, the existence of violence in the home before separation and / or after, their perceptions of past relationships with their teachers and friends in the previous schools and neighbourhoods, their perceptions of the neighbourhoods they moved to relative to that of the neighbourhoods they stayed in prior to separation; their perceptions of their post-divorce relationships with mothers, time since parental separation as well as their ages.

In a nutshell findings of this chapter indicate that children who believed that they were less affected emotionally by divorce and related processes and those who reported positive changes in behaviour were largely those who had one or more of the following characteristics: perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as not close; those who were not victims of violence; those who perceived their post-separation relationships with mothers as close, those who were older as well as those whose experience of separation was not recent.

Although most children in the study believed that one or more of the changes resulting from separation adversely affected their emotions, some reported that they coped well and / or that divorce-related experiences affected their emotions and behaviour in a positive way. They believed they coped well despite their exposure to some stressful divorce experiences. This finding shows that some children were resilient. This concept will be discussed in detail in chapter nine.

## CHAPTER 8

### **Economic Consequences**

Previous research on the economic circumstances of children in Botswana has largely focused on child support laws and practices (see for example Griffith, 1984; Molokomme, 1991; and Alexander et al, 1992). All these studies came from a legal perspective. One of the main findings, which the studies share in common, is that most fathers who do not stay with their children do not financially support them. Consequently, studies on female-headed households in Botswana (cf. Kossoudji and Mueller, 1988; Van Driel, 1994) attest to the widespread poverty among such households compared to male-headed ones. Despite this finding, no research to my knowledge has looked into children's perceptions of the effects of economic hardships on them in Botswana.

This chapter explores respondents' perceptions of the economic effects of separation on children's well being. It is divided into four sections. The first section discusses financial consequences of divorce for children in this study. The second section examines respondents' accounts of the impact of economic hardship on children's wellbeing. The third section explores perceptions of the impact of improvements in standard of living on children. Lastly, children and mothers' perceptions of how they coped with economic hardship are discussed.

I did not use objective measures of changes in family's economic circumstances, but I relied on children and mothers' accounts. I was particularly concerned about how children and mothers gave meaning to their economic circumstances as well as their accounts of the impact of the hardship, not on objective data. The way children created meaning of economic hardships was related to comparisons with their families' economic situations before divorce, their peers economic circumstances as well as economic circumstances in their fathers' households.

#### ***Economic consequences of divorce***

Divorce had different economic consequences for children who participated in this study. The following three types of families emerged from an analysis of children's economic circumstances: a) those that associated it with a decline in standard of



living; b) those that associated divorce with improvements in standards of living; and c) those that associated it with no changes in their economies.

**Table 9 - Divorce related economic changes**

<i>Types of changes</i>	<i>Number of families</i>
No changes	3
Improvements	5
Deterioration	17
Total	25

The above table shows that a majority of children experienced deterioration in their standard of living as a result of their parents' separation. For some children, the economic hardship started before the departure of their fathers from the homes and continued after separation, while for others, the hardship started after separation. Respondents associated the hardship with lack of financial support from fathers. All fathers in the study according to children and mothers were employed. Most of them were also more educated than mothers as shown by the below table.

**Table 10 - Educational backgrounds of mothers and fathers**

<i>Level of education</i>	<i>Number of mothers</i>	<i>Number of fathers</i>
None	6	1
Standard 1-7	8	5
Form 1-form3	1	1
Form 3 and some training	5	5
Form 5 and some training	5	13
Total	25	25

The above table shows that more men than women attained higher education. They were therefore working in better paying jobs. This reflects the broad trend in the country that shows that more men than women are educated and therefore have a higher earning capacity. In addition to their incomes (which were coming in regularly), some of them had wealth such as cattle, houses and cars, which could be easily converted into cash. A majority of men were reported to have supported their families adequately prior to the existence of marital problems that led to divorce as well as prior to the divorce itself, but reduced the support or stopped supporting later. Because men have more economic resources than women, when they stop supporting their families, children suffer as quite often they are in the custody of their mothers.

## The nature of economic hardships

Most mothers and children revealed that they fell into poverty and near poverty after the fathers stopped supporting them. Their accounts of declines in families' living standards ranged from children's lack of basic needs of life such as food and clothes to the absence of TVs, cars, electricity and running water in the houses and lack of recreational facilities. Some mothers also pointed out that after separation, they had to move to small houses, which their children were not accustomed to. Others said that although they were able to meet children's basic needs, they could not afford to buy them some of the things they used to have when fathers were still financially supporting them. All respondents who associated divorce with economic hardship were pessimistic about prospects for recovery in future.

Children lived in families with a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds prior to the separation and the perceived effects of economic hardship on them varied slightly according to the type of families (low, medium or high class) that they lived in prior to the separation. In other words, the nature of economic deprivation was different. For example, children who lived in low class families prior to the separation, i.e. those whose fathers worked in low paying jobs said they missed basic things such as school uniform, money to participate in school activities, etc. Their counterparts whose fathers worked in middle-class and high-class jobs, but whose mothers were either not working or earning low wages missed things such as recreational facilities and televisions, especially during the time immediately following the separation when their mothers' economic status was still unstable.

Family socio-economic background prior to separation was not the only factor that influenced perceptions of how the low level of living affected children, other factors are gender, time since separation, children's perceptions of the economic circumstances of their friends and peers as well as the nature and quality of pre-separation father-child relationships. However associations between the above factors and respondents' perceptions of how the low level of living affected children could not be proved because of the small sample size as well as the study's emphasis on people's perceptions rather than on objective data. Perceptions of how these factors shaped children's perceptions of the effects of economic hardships will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.



The definition of poverty used by some mothers (inability to meet / having difficulties in meeting children's basic needs) is closely related to that which has been used in the report by UNICEF and Government (1989)'s analysis of the situation of women and children in Botswana. According to page 64 of the report, 'poverty is the inability of a household to meet its basic nutritional, health, educational, shelter and recreational needs (i.e., effective minimal level needs). Mothers' reports of poverty after the divorce parallel the widely documented poverty among female-headed, compared to male-headed households in Botswana (Kossoudji and Mueller, 1983; Van Driel, 1994).

Because most respondents associated economic hardship with lack of child support payments, it is worth highlighting their accounts in relation to child support. Only one mother and her child out of the 17 families that experienced economic hardship reported that they were receiving regular court ordered child support payments, but even they perceived the money as too inadequate to meet their needs. The remaining sixteen mothers reported that although their ex-husbands were ordered to pay child support, they were either not paying at all (eleven) or paying irregularly (five). The payments that were ordered ranged from 50 Pula <sup>10</sup> (equivalent to 7 pounds) per month per child to 200 Pula (23 pounds). Mothers strongly felt that even if they were receiving regular payments, the payments ordered were too inadequate to meet their children's needs. This feeling is well founded taking into account the high cost of living especially in urban areas of Botswana.

Economic hardships are not only experienced by children of divorced parents in Botswana, a developing country. Children in developed countries such as Britain (cf. Wadsworth and Maclean, 1986; Eekelaar and Maclean, 1986) and America (cf. Weitzman, 1985; Holden and Smock, 1991; Duncan, 1994) also experience them. However, the hardships experienced by such children may not be as severe as those experienced by children in developing countries because most custodial parents in those countries can rely on state assistance after divorce whereas those in developing countries such as Botswana cannot. Gregory and Foster (1990) for example, in a U.K. study found that prior to divorce, one in twenty women were claiming state benefits (other than child benefit). But after divorce, the figure rose to one in three. None of the women in this study relied on state benefits.

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<sup>10</sup> Pula is the Botswana currency.



Economic hardships impinge on children's rights as they limit their access to the basic needs of life such as education, food, shelter, health and clothing. They also impact on children's social, psychological, health and educational well being. While it is recognised that economic hardships / poverty may have the same impact on children irrespective of whether they live in intact or divorced families, children of divorced parents are likely to be more adversely affected by the hardships because the hardships are often accompanied by other stressors. These include moving to new and less secure neighborhoods, changing schools, loss of supportive networks, being excluded from activities that have become too expensive for the family's budget, conflicts between parents, and lack of information about what is happening in their families. Whether specific changes are positive or negative, the child will need to use considerable energy making adaptations (Sandler et al, 1991; Neil, 1995).

### Factors that exacerbated economic hardships for children

The drastic declines in families' economies that most children experienced as a result of lack of support from fathers were exacerbated by several factors. Firstly, most mothers (21 out of 25) were single at the time of the interview. Only four were cohabiting, and none had remarried. Research has shown that remarriage 'is the most significant means of at least partially recovering former economic status' (Eekelaar and Maclean, 1986: 79) Secondly, several mothers reported that at the time of divorce, they were paying off debts, for example, legal assistance, for furniture, etc. Mothers perceived these debts as one of their main problems. Thirdly, the absence of savings for most mothers and their ex-spouses at the time of divorce worsened their economic circumstances. Almost all mothers revealed that they and their former spouses had no savings at the time of the divorce. This finding parallels that of Eekelaar and Maclean from their British study who found that few families had savings at the time of the divorce.

Fourthly, unfair division of property led some families into poverty. Several mothers lamented that the courts divided property such as furniture, houses, and livestock unfairly as their ex-husbands were given a larger share of the property. They associated the unfair division of property with their low economic circumstances. All the above factors as well as reports of families' movements to low status housing (as indicated by small houses, lack of electricity, water and telephones in the houses) after separation indicate that their living standards drastically went down.



Mothers who had not worked outside the home, who earned low wages, who remained single, as well as those who lived in town, reported the most severe declines. The finding that women earning low wages who lived in town reported severe economic problems is not surprising because in urban areas, one needs money in order to do most things, whereas the situation is not necessarily so in rural areas. How difficult it is to survive with a low salary in a town like Gaborone is illustrated by the situation of Moemedi's mother.

Moemedi's mother is aged 35 years. She had six children and lived with all of them in a two-roomed house in Old Naledi (a shantytown in Gaborone). She started working as a housemaid after her ex-husband stopped supporting her and her children, and earns P200 per month (equivalent to 32 pounds). Prior to the divorce, she stayed with her husband and children in a neighbourhood, which according to her was okay for raising children. Her husband worked as a driver in a private company, and although his salary was not high, he made a lot of money by going on trips and therefore adequately supported the family. Just a few months prior to the separation, he drastically reduced the amount of money he spent on the family, and after separation, the support stopped altogether.

Moemedi's mother did not like the neighbourhood she was living in as it was dirty and alcohol was sold in many families. She therefore believed that the place was not conducive for raising children and planned to move to a better one. However her problem was that rent in a better neighborhood would be expensive, and she would also incur more costs as she would have to pay for public transport to her place of work. She was very worried about raising her children in a neighbourhood where beer was sold and feared that her children would end up drinking beer. She was aware that her children did not like the neighbourhood. At the time of the interview, she was busy looking for a house elsewhere, despite the fact that she knew she could not afford to pay more than the 100 pula she was paying in Old Naledi.

A few fathers (eight) were reported to have never played a substantial role in supporting their families if not any. Children living in such families said they did not experience economic hardships. They experienced either improvements or no changes.

## ***Effects of economic hardships on children***

### **Direct effects on children's social and psychological well being**

Previous research on children and divorce (cf. Walczak and Burns, 1984) has shown that youngsters who are deprived materially tend to feel unequal in relation to their peers and this adversely affects their self-image. This study also found that economic hardships made some children (both girls and boys) appear to themselves to be different from others, and this lowered their self-esteem. Children who reported feelings of low self-esteem were those whose pre-separation economic circumstances varied drastically from those during the post-separation period. Children in this group were largely those whose fathers had prior to the separation always adequately met their economic needs more than they did for their siblings.

Malebogo, a girl aged 14 whose parents separated three years prior to the interview; who had a close relationship with her father during the pre-separation period, and whose mother was a housewife during that time also talked about feeling different when she was with other children.

*I feel bad about my self because I look different. I want my hair to be relaxed and braided like that of my peers.....*

Differences in sibling accounts of feelings of low self-esteem were noted. For example, sibling who believed that fathers favoured their brothers and sisters more than them did not associate divorce related economic hardship with low self-esteem. They only associated it with lack of enough food in the home. This link should be understood in the context of their pre-separation experiences. Quite often in families in which fathers treated children differently, children do not feel deprived of things such as food because: they are not controlled by fathers themselves directly, but by mothers. When it came to commodities such as clothes and toys, that are not shared and that are not controlled directly by mothers, it becomes relatively easier for fathers to discriminate their availability among children.

A drop in income also caused children to feel deprived because they missed the kind of life that they were accustomed to. They missed toys, televisions, electricity and cars in the family. This is shown by the below exchange between the interviewer and Maria, a girl aged 16, whose father was an accountant and mother a tailor during both



the pre and post-separation periods.

*Interviewer: Is there anything that you miss now that you used to have when your father was still staying with you?*

*Maria, girl aged 16 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview: We no longer have nice toys, eat ice creams and chocolates like we used to when dad was around. My father used to transport us to school with his car. Now we walk, but sometimes my mother gives us money to use public transport. These things affect me a lot. You know if you were used to living a comfortable life, and then you no longer live it, you experience more pain compared to someone who had not lived a comfortable life before....*

The distress associated with low income for most families, was exacerbated by worries about anticipated future declines in the already low incomes. One child and her mother for example, believed and worried that the economic hardships they were experiencing were going to worsen in a year's time (after the child turned 18 years) because the child's father would stop paying child support for her, and this would drastically reduce the money available to the family which would mean severe poverty. According to the child and her mother, the law says that divorced fathers are only required to pay child support for children until they reach the age of 18. This however was a misconception because the Botswana Matrimonial Causes Act Cap. 29:06 section 28 (2) states that:

*'On any decree of divorce or declaration of nullity of marriage, the court shall have power to order the husband, and, on a decree of divorce, where the decree is a decree of divorce and is made on the ground of the husband's insanity, shall also have power to order the wife to secure for the benefit of the children such gross sum of money as the court may deem reasonable: Provided that the term for which any sum of money is secured for the benefit of a child shall not extend beyond the date when the child attains 21 years of age'.*

The misconception of this child and her mother created distress and constant worries for them. It shows that lack of knowledge about the laws can cause a considerable amount of stress to people.

Social and psychological problems for children did not only result from their worries about economic hardship, they also resulted from feelings of resentment and betrayal that some children had. These feelings were largely expressed by boys of various



ages whose experience of parental separation took place from less than one to four years prior to the interview. This shows that time since separation did not play a major role in shaping children's feelings of resentment. Antony, a 19 year old, attributed these feelings to the unfair division of valuable property. He strongly felt that he and his siblings had been deprived of their home.

*..... leaving the home was the last thing that I expected to happen to us. The laws are very unfair to deprive us of our home. I feel sad about the loss of the home. What makes me more sad is that my father is not taking good care of it. The tenants are not paying rent and the compound is usually dirty.....It pains me to think that we are suffering economically, while some people are staying in our house free of charge.... The issue of losing the house affects me a lot, and one reason why I agreed to participate in the interview is that I thought you could help me with suggestions about what I can do as a child to get back the house. My mother says she is afraid to pursue the issue because she fears that my father may kill her because he used to beat her severely when they were still staying together.. .. .*

Antony's strong feelings of resentment should be understood in the context of his mothers' economic and occupational background. She worked in a low paying job, both prior to and after separation. Therefore Antony knew that it was going to be difficult for her mother to find resources to build a new house.

Children's feelings of betrayal are well founded because the law divides family property between the husband and the wife, and does not make provision for a child's share of the marital assets.

Cattle are an important source of wealth in Botswana and were referred to in children's accounts of the process of divorce. Two boys from different families who had close relationships with their fathers during the pre-separation period were angry that their fathers had not allocated them any cattle in the economic settlement following divorce. Their fathers had earlier promised to give them some cattle, and they perceived the settlement as unfair and as a sign that their fathers had betrayed them.

*..... I had always gone to the cattle post with dad because girls do not look after cattle. My father always told me that because I am the only boy, when he dies, all the cattle will be mine, and that when I turn 21, he will give me some cattle. Now he has left my mother and when I ask him about the cattle, he says he has no cattle, he sold all of them. I know this is not true.....(Peter, aged 12 whose father worked in a low paying job, but who had cattle as a supplement to his income)*



The below exchange between Aron, aged 13, whose father was the head of one big government department – a very high paying job; and who perceived his relationship with him as close also shows children's feelings of betrayal.

*Interviewer: Would you say your parents' separation was a major stressor to you or not?*

*Aron, aged 13 Yes, it was because I miss my father, I see him often these days, but I want to stay with him. Again he had promised to give me some cattle when I pass standard 7, but he has not because he no longer stays with us. If he was still staying with us, he could have given them to me. I don't know....I think he did not do the right thing because he has not fulfilled his promise. Even if he is no longer staying with us, he should just give me the cattle.....People who have cattle are rich, so if he could give me the cattle, even if they are not many, I can take care of them so that when I am an adult, I can be rich like my father is.....*

Children's feelings of betrayal should be understood in the context of the historic and social view of cattle in the country. In both traditional Tswana society and contemporary Botswana, cattle were, and are still, viewed as sources of power, status and wealth (Van Driel, 1994). They benefit Botswana in several ways. They provide financial security as they can be sold in time of need and are easily converted into cash, they are a good self reproducing investment as they can multiply, they help in ploughing, they can be used as bride-wealth and they offer nourishment in the form of milk and meat (Brown, 1983). The possession of cattle, therefore is key to many aspects of economic and social relations in Botswana (Brown, 1983). Cliffe and Moorsom (1979) noted that the relative importance of cattle as a determinant of wealth has increased in importance in the past decades, particularly because of the opening of abattoirs in the country as well as access to the European Economic Community market for beef exports at inflated rates. However cattle are owned by few people (largely men) in the country (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1989; Kidd et al, 1997). Almost all women in this study, for example reported that they had no cattle.

Because Botswana men both in the past and currently have more wealth, more power, and a higher status than women, they control and manage cattle (Van Driel, 1994). Similarly, boys rather than girls are socialised to look after cattle and to perform other male tasks outside the home, while girls are in charge of household chores. Even when it comes to inheritance, boys were given cattle, while girls were not given



any (Schapera, 1938; Van Driel, 1994). According to Schapera (1938: 216), 'girls and women were as a rule not given cattle because it was assumed they would eventually marry, and this would have the effect of scattering the property belonging to the agnatic group'. Schapera however observed that women were given cattle in exceptional cases, like through the *tshwaiso* system, where a man earmarked a beast for each child at birth. He noted that this practice tended to favour males.

Aron and Peter's siblings were not promised any cattle, therefore they did not express feelings of betrayal that Aron and Peter held as a result of their fathers' failure to fulfil their promise. The two boys' siblings linked the absence of such promise to the neutral relationships they had with their fathers both prior to and after separation. Aron and Peter's intense feelings of anger and betrayal therefore have implications for how they coped with the divorce process.

Homes and cattle were not the only property that children felt deprived of. Other properties include beds, stoves, televisions, music systems, and refrigerators. Children's feelings of resentment about the loss of such items were also shared by their mothers. Most mothers felt marital property was divided unfairly by the courts. Some reported that because they ran away from violent homes, they left most of their belongings in the marital homes, and that two main reasons hindered them from having a fair share in the marital property. First, the divorce hearing / case took place a year to two after their departure from the homes, as a result they realised that the furniture they left was old and had not been properly looked after since their departure, therefore, they lost interest in it. Second, fear of violence deterred them from indicating interest in the property, so they told their lawyers that they did not want the property.

About ten children (mainly older boys and girls) attributed feelings of resentment and betrayal to the fact that their standard of living was significantly less than that in their fathers' new households. One explanation why these feelings were largely held by older children is that they had the ability to be aware of a wider range of circumstances which is not always the case with their younger counterparts. Children's feelings of resentment about the discrepancies between their standard of living and their fathers' are not peculiar to children in this study only, some children in Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) study also held them. These feelings according to



Wallerstein and Kelly led to feelings of anger among some children as reflected in the below quotation.

“When the downward change in the family standard of living followed the divorce and the discrepancy between the father’s standard of living and that of the mother and children was striking, this discrepancy was often central to the life of the family and remained as a festering source of anger and bitter preoccupation. ....Mothers and children were likely to share in their anger at the father and to experience a pervasive sense of deprivation, sometimes depression, accompanied by a feeling that life was unrewarding and unjust” (p. 231).

Children in this study who resented their low standard of living compared to their fathers’ attributed their families’ low standard of living to the fact that their fathers were not taking care of them, but were instead spending money on themselves, and their new families. They had lived in reasonably stable financial situations prior to the experience of low family income. For example, Kabelo, a 19 year old boy whose father was a lecturer in one of the colleges in the country, her mother a primary school teacher, and who perceived his relationship with his father both prior to and after separation as poor had the following words to say:

*My father lives a comfortable life, but we are suffering. He has two cars, music systems, satellite dish and other modern things. We don’t have any of those things. When I have visited him, I get so disturbed. This is very unfair. He only cares about himself, not us. But because I am a child, I cannot tell him my feelings. The only thing that I do is to ask for money from him in a polite way. Sometimes he gives me money, but sometimes he does not saying that he does not have money....I always doubt it when he tells me that he has no money because he is rich. I know he earns a lot of money because he teaches in a college....*

Kabelo’s sister - aged 16, however did not express feelings of resentment. She only pointed out that she felt sad because of the economic hardship her family experienced, and that she wished her father could play a more prominent role in financially supporting them.

*.....After my mother and father stopped staying together, we no longer lived a comfortable life.....There was no electricity in the house we first lived in after my mother left my father, but now the house we live in has electricity. But I just want my father to give my mother money to buy things for us....*

*Interviewer: How do you feel about your father not giving your mother money to buy*



*you and your siblings things you need?*

*Kabelo's sister: It makes me sad...*

Kamogelo, an 18 year boy whose mother worked as a cleaner during the post-divorce period; who perceived his relationship with his father both before and after separation as poor also expressed feelings of resentment.

*I know that my father has built a beautiful house for the woman that he is staying with. I feel that he has betrayed us, I don't know why he did not build a similar house for us... .*

These feelings were not only expressed by children, but by their mothers as well. Mothers reported being perpetually worried about 'making ends meet' and that time and again, they felt bitter at the discrepancies between their standard of living and that of their ex-husbands. These worries made mothers become distressed, angry and resentful. The story of Catherine's mother below clearly illustrates this point.

*.....you see that tape recorder that you are holding, my ex-husband's purse was the same size as that tape recorder. Not only was his purse big, it was always full of money. He is an Inspector in a construction company and although I don't know how much he earns, I know he earns a lot of money. That is why I agreed when he told me that there is no need for me to seek employment outside the home, but to just stay home and take care of the children. His salary was more than adequate to meet our needs. He had two cars which were all driven by him because I don't know how to drive, he used to give me P1,500 per month to buy food and other money for buying clothes for myself and the children every month. The fridge was always full of food. We also had many cattle, so we lived a comfortable life. Since December, 1996, when he moved out of the home to stay with another woman, I became poor. I mean me and my children live in poverty. The only property that the court gave me is this house that we are staying in..... I was not given any share of the cattle that we had....I tell you me and my children live a life of poverty. I am still not working and am seriously looking for a job. I know it is going to be difficult for me to find one because I only went to school up to standard 7 (the last year of primary school-my emphasis). So even if I find a job, I will not earn enough money to support the children.....I am angry at that man because he is now living a comfortable life with the woman he is staying with, and he is not giving us anything. I mean the money he pays as child support is very small compared to the type of life he is living with his girl friend and her children..... .*

Catherine's mother's bitter feelings expressed above should be understood in the context of her pre-separation experiences. Her ex-husband worked in a high paying job and had always provided adequate financial support to the family. The mother herself did not work outside the home both before and after separation. She perceived



the amount of child support payments as small compared to the money her ex-husband used to give her before separation.

### Indirect effects of economic hardships on children's social and psychological well-being

The foregoing discussion has focused on how a low level of available financial resources affected children directly. Now attention will turn to the indirect effects. Economic hardships impacted indirectly upon the social and psychological wellbeing of children in that it imposed a significant reallocation of gender roles, which in turn adversely affected some children's relationships with their mothers. Before separation, in ten families, fathers were primarily responsibility for supporting children financially, while mothers were housewives. They largely provided children with services. This was no longer the case after divorce because economic hardships forced some mothers to engage in hectic work schedules to improve their families' standard of living. Such mothers did not only lack work experience, they also had low educational attainments, and therefore job opportunities available to them were limited.

Immediately following the separation for example, six mothers worked as domestic workers, two worked as cleaners and one as a cook in a caravan. These types of jobs are hectic and low paying. The number of women who entered domestic service may seem high, but it is common taking into account the fact that in Botswana, more women than men are not educated (see chapter one for figures). The major form of employment for uneducated women in towns is domestic service (Selolwane, 1983; Izzard, 1985; Lesetedi and Ngcongo, 1995). Most women and girl children have low education mainly due the large drop out rate that is exacerbated by a high teenage pregnancy rate, one of the highest in Africa (Kidd et al, 1997).

Domestic work is associated with little regulation or security, low wages and long hours of work (Lesetedi and Ngcongo, 1995; Kidd et al, 1997), as well as residential separation of children from mothers (Selolwane, 1983; Izzard, 1985). As such, mothers' involvement in it has implications for the both the social and psychological wellbeing of children. In Izzard's study, for example, over three-quarters of the urban sample that were employed as domestic workers lived apart from their children. In this study, three out of six women who worked as domestic workers did not stay with



their children immediately after divorce, but they stayed with them later. In explaining why she was not staying with her children in town immediately after the separation, one of the women for example said:

*....you think that could have been possible! No, people here don't want maids to stay with their children. They give all sorts of reasons like our children can make their yards dirty, can eat the food they have bought, and can hinder us from working effectively. My employers just told me that they could only hire me if I did not bring my children with me. I was desperate, I needed the job, so I left my children with my parents in the village. It was only a few months ago after I found the man I stay with when I began staying with my children. I am not staying with my employers, but I commute to my place of work. The man I live with helps me to pay rent, that is why I am planning to stay with them in town.... .*

Mothers who did not stay with their children pointed out that their children stayed with grandparents in rural areas because they wanted to avoid problems of combining the roles of urban wage earner and mother. These problems according to the mothers are the need for child care, the high cost of living in towns, and the difficulties and expenses involved in securing accommodation (see also Izzard, 1985).

Working as housemaids drastically reduces the time women spend with their children irrespective of whether they stay with them or leave them in the rural area / village. This meant that children literally lost both parents - one who walked out on them and another who was working hard to keep them clothed and fed such that she had little time for parenting. Children reported drastic declines in time spent with their mothers as well as the contact. They missed them, worried about them, and felt anxious. This finding supports that of research from other countries (Buehler and Legg, 1992) that has also found that mothers in post-divorce families which have money problems spend less time with their children and this increase child anxiety. The experience of parental separation for children in this study was recent, therefore it is possible that with the passage of time, some who had difficulties in coping with it may have less adjustment problems.

The difficulties that some families experienced over income had an impact on the neighbourhoods they moved to. Some families moved to neighbourhoods of low status and this resulted in them lacking / missing recreational facilities that they had in previous neighbourhoods. Two children who stayed in high-class families after divorce reported that they no longer attended swimming lessons, as their mothers did



not have the money to pay for them. Children reported feelings of sadness as a result. Children's accounts that they no longer attended swimming classes show that the kind of life they lived prior to divorce shaped their definitions of a low level of living as well as its impact on them.

Change of residence not only meant that children had to adjust to new living conditions, but also meant loss of important social networks of support which created sad feelings among children. One child for example pointed out that

*The neighborhood we moved to was not as good as the one we stayed in before. It was of a low standard. Most of my mothers' relatives stopped visiting us because we no longer lived a comfortable life, while they did.....This made me sad..... (Kabelo, boy aged 19).*

### Impact of economic hardships on children's education

Research from Western countries (Wodarski, 1982; Whelan, 1994) has shown that children who experience a drastic deterioration in their standard of living following parental separations are likely to have psychological and behavioral difficulties at school that can adversely affect their academic performance.

Out of the seventeen children in this study who associated their parents' divorce with economic hardships, seven perceived the hardships as having affected their education. These children had mothers who were not working outside the home prior to separation. The mothers had low educational qualifications and little if not any job experience. The children lamented how lack of school uniform and other necessities made them perform poorly. The effects of economic hardships on some children's education subsided with time as mothers entered the job market. However, for two children, the effects on their education were long-term as we shall see later in the chapter.

*....I could not listen in class because I felt sad about my situation. My mind was always thinking about it... (Moemedi, boy aged 12 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview).*

*Interviewer: How is the situation now?*

*Moemedi: It is better because my mother is working though she earns little money, things are better.....*

Joseph, aged 13 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview also believed the effects were short-term.

*Now things are better. My mother is working and she can buy me pencils and other school things, Before she found work, I did not like school. I used to go to school with dirty clothes because there was no soap in the home, and other children used to laugh at me. ...I did not like school and I got low grades....*

Implicit in the above quotations are messages that not only show how a low level of living affected children's performance, but that also show children's feelings. Moemedi, for example, revealed that he felt sad about his situation, while Joseph revealed feelings of shame and isolation because of his peers' reaction to his dirty clothes. Children's words suggest a relationship between their emotional states / reactions and their educational performance. This relationship can come about because when one's emotions are low, it can be difficult for one to concentrate in school as one's mind may be preoccupied with issues that cause the feelings.

Lack of funds also resulted in a few children not being able to participate in regular school activities. This provoked feelings of isolation and sadness.

*Sometimes when there were concerts at school, I did not attend because my mother did not have money. Sometimes when I went, I was only given money for entrance and none to buy nice things that other children bought. I envied children who had money. ... (Andrew, aged 18, whose parents separated 4 years prior to the time of the interview)*

*Interviewer: Do you feel that divorce-related economic hardships still affects your life now?*

*Andrew: No, things are okay now. My mother works as a domestic worker and she tries hard to provide us with what we need with her little salary. And I will soon complete my training and earn my own money.....*

For two children from different families, the impact of economic hardships on them went beyond poor performance, and led to their discontinuation from school since their mothers were not able to pay for their school fees. These children had not performed well in government schools and were attending private secondary schools. The following account from one of the children's mothers shows how her children's education was adversely affected by economic hardships.

*Two of my children were affected. They failed form two because of seeing the*



*violence their father used to inflict on me. After that I asked him to pay for their school fees at a private secondary school, but he refused. He only paid for the boy, but later stopped saying he does not have money to waste. The education fees were high as I also had to pay for his rent, food and uniform and books, so I could not manage as I am only working as a cleaner and earning very low wages, and he had to stop attending school..... .*

This quote shows the financial costs that parents who enroll children in private schools outside their areas of residence have to deal with (school fees, rent, books and uniform and food). Unemployed mothers and those earning low wages can find it difficult to meet these costs. Because most children of unmarried mothers in the country are not supported by their fathers (cf. Molokomme, 1990; Van-Driel, 1994), it is not surprising that some divorced women had difficulties in meeting their children's educational costs. It should be noted that although education in Botswana is free, government schools give children only one chance to write examinations. If the children do not pass examinations in government schools, usually parents who can afford it send them to private schools. Most parents who earn low wages cannot afford to meet the costs of private schools.

Economic hardships deprived children of furthering their education through a second chance in school. Given that chance, children may have performed better taking into account that they reported that parental violence and unhappy family life prior to the separation largely affected their academic performance. This deprivation forced the children prematurely into the labor market. The two adolescents in this study who discontinued from school because of economic hardships had to work (one – aged 17 as a domestic worker and the other – aged 19 in a shop). Evidence from developed countries shows that lack of educational qualifications is a major predictor of subsequent poverty (McLanahan, 1985).

### Impact of economic hardships on children's health

A majority of children and mothers did not identify any immediate health effects of economic hardships, however research on poverty shows that it has adverse effects on people's health. The effects of poverty on children's health may not have been apparent to children and their mothers, particularly that they had not manifested themselves yet, but were probably going to take some time before they manifest themselves.



According to one study conducted by the Botswana Institute for Development Policy Analysis (1997), poverty adversely affects the health of people. The study found that poor people – most of whom live in female headed households that lack assets and are labor scarce rely more on wood and charcoal for cooking and on paraffin gas for lighting. This has serious implications for the health of household members because they are more likely to live in smoky environments. According to the institute, this explains the high incidence of acute respiratory infections and communicable diseases among children in rural areas. One child in this study associated the economic hardships their families experienced with health problems.

*...the kind of life we lived after we moved from Sebele was not nice. We lived in a small house which had no water, electricity, TV, electric stove, fridge and other things that I liked. We just used paraffin to cook and I used to cough a lot because of the smoke from the stove. When I told my mother to buy a gas stove, she told me that she did not have money because my father was not taking care of us. I used to get sick most of the time because of the smoke. Now things are a bit better because we have a little gas stove, but I think too much smoke got into my body and that is why sometimes I still cough.... (Nonofa, girl aged 14 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview).*

Although none of the mothers and children in this study associated low family income with children's nutrition, there is evidence that living in low income and poor families adversely affects the nutritional status of children. Morgan (1988) contends that the Botswana national nutritional surveillance system over the last few years prior to 1988, have found that children living in low-income families had above average levels of under nutrition. There is also evidence that children who are not supported by their fathers suffer nutritionally. A study of young children who were nutritionally at risk (defined as below 80 per cent of normal weight age) conducted by the Ministry of health in Botswana (1978) found that 42% did not receive any support from their fathers.

So far, the discussion has shown that respondents regarded their financial circumstances as having played an important role in children's emotional and educational well being. It is however, not the only factor. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the prevalence of violence in the home, lack of informational support, changes in schools and neighbourhoods that resulted in loss of important social networks also played a role. We shall also see in chapter nine how the nature of children's relationships with both family and social network members complicated



some children's adjustment. Because economic hardship is not the only factor that affects children's wellbeing, this implies that if children experience the hardship, but are not exposed to other divorce related hardships, they may be in a better position to thrive in the face of adversity (become resilient).

### ***The impact of improved standards of living on children***

Children in five families reported that although they experienced declines in their standards of living immediately after their parents stopped staying together, the situation subsequently improved. Children in this group had experienced parental separation between 2 and 4 years prior to the interview. During the period when the interviews were conducted, both the children and their mothers perceived their families' economic situations as better than both before their parents' separation and immediately after the separation. Each of the five children had his /her own perception of improvements in their family's standards of living, however there were some overlaps. One common definition which children used to interpret improvements in living standards was the availability of basic necessities such as food, soap, glycerin, clothes and school uniform in the home more often than before separation. They reported that the improvements in their families' standards of living made them happy. Their mothers' confirmed children's accounts.

In reconstructing histories of their families' economic circumstances prior to the improvements in standards of living, some children described vividly the positive changes that took place.

*When my parents were still married, my mother was not working, but my father was. He worked in South African mines, but he rarely bought anything for us. I don't know what he did with his money...We were suffering because he gave my mother money only once in a while. Immediately after they stopped staying together, I think we suffered more because nobody gave my mother money at all. But after a few months my mother found employment. So now we live a better life than when my parents were still staying together. She cleans at the hospital, and she is able to buy us things that we want. I am happy because I am able to wear proper school uniform like other children, not dirty and torn ones. I no longer worry that we are poor in the family. Most of the time, there is food in the house, compared to the time when we were still staying with dad as my mother was not working..... (Joseph, aged 13 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview).*

Other children interpreted the improvements in their standard of living that



accompanied divorce by constructing hypothetical narratives contrasting what events might have been like, if their parents were still staying together, with what they were actually like after separation. This is illustrated in the final sentence of the following exchange between the interviewer and Grace, a 21 year old girl pursuing a degree cause at the University whose parents divorced two years from the period of the interview.

*Interviewer: What has been the best thing about your life since the divorce?*

*Grace: Well, I believe divorce was the best thing because we now live a better life.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that*

*Grace: I mean my father always used the family money on his own things such as gambling and alcohol. He did not take care of us. Sometimes he even used my mother's money as well. So now my mother no longer gives anyone money to use in things which do not benefit the family. And because of this, my mother has managed to extend the house that we are now staying in. Before it was extended, it had only two bedrooms and I slept with my younger siblings in one bedroom. Now it is four bedrooms and I have my own bedroom. I like having my own bedroom because when my friends visit me, we have some privacy. I don't think that she could have managed to extend the house if she was still married to my father.....*

From the above exchange, it is clear that family (male) income did not necessarily relate to that available to the mother and children. Grace's father for example, was an accountant and earning a high income, but his income did not benefit the children. Grace was not the only one who reported not benefiting from his fathers' income, seven other children also did, four of whom reported improvements in standard of living and three of whom reported no changes in standard of living.

Three mothers who were cohabiting associated the improvement of their families' economies with the help they were getting from their partners. Two of the mothers' children shared this view. However one of the children did not. The child instead perceived his mother's partner as a liability in the home. He resented that the man instead of contributing to the financial wellbeing of the family was making the family live a poor quality life because he was using his mother's money for his own benefit, not for the benefit of the family.



## **Coping**

### **Children's coping strategies**

The foregoing discussion has indicated that economic hardships associated with divorce caused social, psychological, educational and health problems for children. When children were asked how they coped with hardships, half of those who experienced them said they had no way of coping. These children believed that as children, they are not supposed to ask for money and material things from older people, but should just depend on their parents for providing them with what they need. Because of this belief, they often did not ask (take a proactive role) for money from anyone, but just waited until somebody was kind enough to give them money. They pointed out that although their mothers tried hard to buy food and other things used in the family, sometimes they felt like having their own money to buy what they themselves needed, (e.g. hair creams, snacks) not what the family as a whole needed.

Some children, however, were not passive objects in the process, but were active and took measures to cope with their predicaments. Children used various strategies such as placing less financial demands on their mothers (three) to reduce tension between them and mothers, working part-time to find money for school uniform (one), working in a shop, working as a house maid, wishful thinking and asking for money from family and social network members.

Children reported that sometimes their requests for money and material things from their family and social network members were fruitful, while during other times, they were not. They revealed that their mothers hardly gave them any money because their budgets were tight. For example one child said:

*The only way that I try to deal with the low level of living is by asking my mother to give me money, but she rarely gives it to me because she is supporting many people. After she stopped staying with my father, my unemployed auntie and her five children came to stay with us, and this made us suffer more economically. ....I really don't want them to stay with us, I always tell my mother to chase them away, but she says she finds it difficult to do so. My mother buys big bags of sugar, flour and other things, but they get finished quickly because there are just too many people in the home. Before my parents divorce, we were few in the family and both my father and my mother were supporting us, now we are many, and my mother is the only one supporting us....Every time when I ask her for money, she says she has no money because she is feeding many people....(Nonofo, girl aged 14 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview, and whose mother worked as primary*



*school teacher)*

Not only did children report rarely receiving money from mothers, they also reported that their fathers rarely gave them money either. Reports of fathers' responses to their children's requests for money were derived from mothers and children only. Both children and mothers reported that most fathers did not respond positively to children's requests. They attributed such responses to the fact that the children's fathers had other priorities.

A few older children coped with their families' low level of income by thinking positively about it. They used positive thinking to compare family life after divorce to that before divorce. Their accounts show that the former was better than the latter.

*It is better to live a life without violence than to live in a violent home. The only problem now is that my father no longer gives my mother money and we suffer, but I still believe that lack of money is better than staying in a family where one parent beats the other and beats children as my father used to do..... ( Mercy, girl aged 16)*

Several children who lived in middle and upper class families prior to separation used wishful thinking to help them cope with losses related to economic hardships. Given that most children and mothers were forced out of their homes due to domestic violence, they were unable to collect some of the commodities they valued such as their bicycles, beds and televisions. Even if mothers had the time to collect those items, they revealed that they could not have done so because they feared violence. Children dreamed about these commodities. In their dreams, they were reunited with lost but cherished possessions.

*.....Sometimes I dream about the bicycle that I had. I loved it very much. My uncle had bought it for me. When I tell my mother that we should go and take it, she says she is afraid of my father ..... (Pitso, boy aged 14)*

Children also had fantasies about the kind of lives they lived, but they did not view this strategy as useful.

*The home we lived in was good. Each of us had our own bedrooms, now we have to share bedrooms as we live in a small house. I hope that one day we will stay in a big house again. My room would have my own things, and stuff that I like.....(Daisy, aged 14)*



*Interviewer: Do you believe thinking about the nice life you lived is useful in helping you to cope with economic hardships?*

*Daisy: I don't think so, but there is nothing I can do.*

### Mothers' coping mechanisms

Mothers were custodial parents, therefore, the ways they coped with economic hardships impacted upon their children's economic circumstances. It is because of this link that mothers' coping strategies are discussed. Mothers mentioned several sources from which they drew economic support. These are earnings, extended family, crop production for subsistence consumption and renting out some rooms of houses in town. Only one mother in the sample reported that she coped by child support payments, however she perceived the regular payments she was receiving as inadequate to meet her children's needs. Others (5) did not view child payments as a way of coping because they were irregular, unreliable and low, while others (11) said they received no child support payments at all.

Women's reports that child support payments were too inadequate, irregular or not received at all shows that the child support system in Botswana is failing to meet children's needs. This finding supports those of previous studies in the country that have shown that the system is ineffective (cf. Alexander et al, 1992). The finding that the child support system is failing to meet the needs of children in maternal custody should be understood in the context of information presented elsewhere in the thesis that Botswana is a patriarchal society where men largely control and make decisions both in the public and the private spheres of life. In such a system, men are likely to make decisions and policies that favour them. The patriarchal system leads to women and children suffering. The economic distress that some women experience as a result of divorce as noted earlier partly resulted their inability to provide social support to children that could in turn facilitate their adjustment to the divorce process.

Most mothers in the study were employed, both before and after separation, so they primarily relied on their earnings, however they perceived them as inadequate to meet their families' needs. Mothers (nine) who joined the labor force for the first time reported greater difficulties in meeting their families' needs than their

counterparts who had been working prior to the marital rupture. However, three expressed satisfaction that they were (for the first time in their lives) able to have money they were directly in control of, rather than depending on men's income which were irregular, unreliable and sometimes accompanied by violence.

Mothers who worked in well paying jobs relied less on extended family members for financial support. Instead, extended family members expected and requested financial help from them. Women's accounts show that because relatives knew that they were no longer married and sharing their income with their husbands, they had to share it with them. This according to women exacerbated their economic conditions as shown by the words of one of the mothers below.

*I am the only one who is educated in my family. My parents are not working and my siblings earn very low wages. So both my siblings and my parents want me to give them more money than I used to give them when I was married....*

From the above words, we see that relatives believed that now that the woman's husband had left, the woman was in control of money that was not the case before.

Several women who earned low wages and those who were unemployed relied more on extended family members. Although some women reported that the ability of extended family members to help was limited as they also had their own families to support, they appreciated the help they received and believed that without such help, they could not have survived.

*My younger sister has always helped me a lot. Even when I was still married because she knew that that man was not taking care of me, she used to give me money and food. My brothers also sometimes help me. They have always done their best to help me even though they also support their own children.....*

Some women's relatives in rural areas - particularly their parents - acted as safety nets for them. Women's parents provided them with accommodation, food and other necessities.

*My sister has helped me a lot. I stay with her and she provides me and my children with food and every thing. I have never worked outside the home, so I did not bring anything to help my sister. But she does not complain. Only her children complain about my stay with her....*

*I stayed with my parents for sometime in the village after the separation. They*



*helped me a lot because I left the marriage empty handed. I mean I did not get even a bed....*

Some women perceived the lack of support from relatives in a negative manner. The lack of support from relatives was largely manifested in relation to the issue of accommodation as shown by the following words of some women.

*I did not work before the separation, only my husband worked. We lived in Kanye, and my parents also lived there. So after the separation, I stayed with my parents at their place. They were not eager to welcome me even though they knew that my ex-husband was violent to me for many years. So I told them that if they are not going to accept me, I will go and stay somewhere else in the village with people who are not my relatives. I also told them that the fact that I had come to their place indicates that life for me in the marital home was unbearable. I told them that the suffering I incurred was enough, and I was no longer prepared to suffer again. ....*

*My mother did not want me to leave the marital home. After I left the marital home, she was just not showing any interest in me. I tell you I had built a one-room house in her yard before I got married, but after the separation, when I told her that I want to stay in my house, she refused saying that my sister was already staying in it....*

The foregoing discussion on the role of relatives shows two sides of the coin. Some women perceived relatives as very helpful, while others did not. Research which shows that divorced women and their children in contemporary African countries are likely to lack financial support from relatives compared with in the past cited in chapter one is too general and overlooks the fact that some women do receive support from extended family members.

Despite the economic hardships mothers experienced, none reported utilising government benefit which some poor people use entitled 'the destitute programme'. Women reported that lack of knowledge about the programme deterred them from using it. However, probably even if the women had tried to use it, they would not have been eligible because the programme does not benefit people who are able bodied because it is assumed that they can be able to work. It helps those who are without assets, physically or mentally incapable of working due to old age, physical or mental handicap, minor children whose parents have died or deserted the family or people rendered helpless due to natural disasters or temporary hardship (Botswana National Policy on Destitutes, p2&3, 1980)<sup>11</sup>. The finding that none of the women benefited from the above government programme indicates that very few divorced

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<sup>11</sup> The policy is under review.



women if any in the country utilize state programmes after divorce like in developed countries. Burman and Fuchs (1986) also found that the South African welfare system provides no assistance to able-bodied people, and as such most divorced women do not benefit from it too.

Two women who lived in a rural area reported that they tried to cope with the hardships by crop production for subsistence consumption. However because of the poor rains in the country as well as lack of resources to plough, they abandoned the option since they were getting very low yields compared to the money they used in hiring tractors. The difficulties that female-headed households have in producing crops in Botswana are not peculiar to the women in this study, they have been noted by Brown (1983). According to Brown, the insecure economic situation of such households makes it difficult for them to farm.

A point worth highlighting about rural life in Botswana is that most people in rural areas still rely on subsistence agriculture (crop production) despite the poor rains. In years with good rains, many households sell a portion of their produce to obtain cash or in kind payments (UNICEF and Government of Botswana, 1989). Similarly, during years of good rains, people can get extra bags of sorghum, beans, and vegetables for future use. All these products are not perishable if properly stored. Because of this, some people can survive without necessarily having money like in towns and in developed countries.

Women who were cohabiting viewed it as helpful in alleviating their economic circumstances. Out of the four women who lived with partners, three mentioned that their partners helped them to cope with the economic hardships as they provided financial support to them. The fourth woman said her partner's income made little difference as it was small.

Although most mothers attributed their families' economic circumstances to lack of child support payments, only a few coped with the hardships by filing child support complaints. The rest did not for a variety of reasons. These include fear of violence, fear of witchcraft, lack of knowledge about the laws, and the beliefs that the money ordered was too small such that it would not make any difference to children's lives.

The finding that some women did not file child support complaints because they



feared witchcraft complements that of Alexander et al, (1992) from their study of child maintenance laws and practices in Botswana. These fears are understandable taking into account Van Driel (1994) and Staugard 's (1985) findings that beliefs in witchcraft are part of the daily lives of Batswana <sup>12</sup>. Similarly, women's reluctance to file child support complaints in fear of violence from their ex-husbands are well founded taking into account that most women in this study had experienced violence during the period of their marriages.

Six out of the seven women who filed child support complaints reported that their efforts were fruitless. Only one said the outcome of her complaint was positive, at least on a temporary basis since the outcome was short lived. Below is the latter's account.

*I reported the matter to the magistrate. The magistrate asked me how much my ex-husband was earning, and how many children I have. I told him that I did not know his salary. ....He wrote him many letters telling him to come to his office. But he did not respond. In the last letter that he wrote to him, he told him that if he is not going to respond, he is going to take action against him. But still he did not come to the magistrate's office. I went to the magistrate's office again and he gave me a letter to take to the police. The police then went with me to his place of work, and when we got there, they gave the letter to his employer. The employer called him and he told the police that he did not have money, so his employer paid for him, and told him that he will deduct the money from his salary at the end of the month. The following month and subsequent months, he did not pay. I went to the magistrate's office again and he wrote a letter requesting the police to accompany me to his place of work. We went there again, but this time his employer told us that he is not going to pay for him again. Later on I learned that he has stopped working because I and the police were harassing him saying he should support his children .*

The above account shows how difficult it can be for some mothers to receive child support payments. It should be noted that not all magistrates in the country could have taken the action of continuously following a father up, like the one mentioned in the above story. Some do not partly because they do not have the time to do so.

In some cases, the system failed to enforce a support order even when the mother had provided detailed information about the absent father, his residence and his place of employment. When mothers asked from the magistrate's office about the status of their complaints, they were told that letters were sent to the men, but they have not replied. The inability / failure of the child support system in Botswana to enforce

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<sup>12</sup> Batswana refers to the people of Botswana.



child support payments is well documented (cf. Molokomme, 1990; Alexander et al, 1992).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown that the economic consequences of divorce for children were diverse. Most respondents reported declines in their standards of living. For some, the declines started before separation and continued after, while for others, they started after separation. Respondents attributed their economic situations largely to children's desertion by fathers. Mothers pointed out that incomes available to them were inadequate to meet their children's needs and that this led both them and their children to live in poverty. The finding that most children associated declines in their standards of living with parental separation supports the widely documented accounts of poverty among female-headed households compared to male headed ones in Botswana.

Children and mothers assigned meanings to the economic hardships and these shaped their perceptions of how the hardships affected them. They reported adverse effects on the social and psychological, educational as well as health wellbeing of children. Several factors shaped respondents' accounts of the effects of economic hardship on children. These are: time since separation, children's ages, their gender, perceptions of: fathers' post-divorce economic circumstances, that of the type of life their friends were living as well as of the economic gap between pre and post-divorce families. Children of both manual and professional fathers experienced economic hardship, but the nature of such hardships was different. Some boys expressed intense feelings of betrayal, while none of the girls the study felt that way. Older children resented differences in their families' standard of living and that of their fathers' new families. Findings of this chapter show that perceptions are not static, but dynamic.

Children whose pre-separation economic circumstances varied greatly from the post-separation ones reported more severe effects than their counterparts whose economic circumstances did not change much after separation. Children in the former group included those who lived in high-class families prior to separation, those whose mothers entered the job market for the first time after separation as well as those whose material needs were met more adequately by their fathers prior to separation



compared to those of their siblings.

The chapter has also shown that when some mothers experienced a low level of living, they became distressed and this impaired their parenting capacities, including their ability to provide social support to children. Providing better financial resources for mothers, for example by improving the child support system as well as dividing marital property fairly can go a long way in reducing mothers' distress and therefore make them more responsive to children's social and emotional needs.

Children and mothers in five families reported that they recovered economically after sometime. This shows that the experience of economic hardships for some families was temporary. Three other families reported no changes in their economic situations because their fathers / ex-husbands had not taken care of the families in the past.

Children and mothers used various strategies to cope with the economic hardships. One common strategy that they used is relying on relatives. Relatives' responses to mothers' requests were diverse. While some were positive, others were negative. This chapter has shown that a majority of mothers did not perceive child support payments as a strategy that helped them to cope. This implies that greater attention needs to be paid to improving the child support system so that it could be more responsive to children's needs.

An important finding regarding children's coping strategies is that some took steps to alleviate their conditions. The coping strategies that children used were partly shaped by their interpretations of their financial hardships, as well as the resources available from their family and social network members. These mediators of children's coping are in line with the premises of family stress theory.

Divorce not only affected children's economic circumstances, their emotions and their behaviour, it also affected their relationships with family and social network members. The next chapter focuses on this issue.

## CHAPTER 9

### Effects on Relationships

Existing literature on the influence of divorce on children's relationships is characterised by gaps and this study was intended to fill some of such gaps. First, most research originates from western countries and therefore may not necessarily be relevant to a developing country. Second most studies are quantitative. They use large numbers of subjects and objective measures and therefore largely focus on measurable outcomes. Although such research is important, it overlooks mechanisms, processes and dynamics that take place in post-divorce relationships. Relationships can be characterised by power, control, negotiation, resistance, boundaries, ambiguities, fluidity and complexity and these processes can better be explored through a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach.

In examining children's and mothers' accounts of the processes involved, we hope to show that attempts to measure general effects of divorce on children's relationships may obscure some of the complexities that are inherent in post-divorce relationships. Third, most research focuses on the effects of divorce on children's relationships with parents (cf. Jacobson, 1978; Fine et al, 1983; Fine et al, 1986; Seltzer, 1991). Children not only have relationships with parents, they have relationships with a wide range of people, such as siblings, friends and peers, relatives, neighbours and professionals.

In this chapter, I explore respondents' perceptions of how children's relationships with family and social network members changed as a direct or indirect consequence of divorce. Because children usually have the most frequent contact with nuclear family members, a discussion of how divorce influenced their relationships with siblings and parents will be presented first. The second section of the chapter focuses on perceptions of how parental divorce affected children's relationships with members of their wider social network. The last section focuses on how children coped with changes in relationships with family and social network members.

Respondents' accounts illustrate the complexity, fluidity and dynamic nature of post-divorce relationships. There were certain common themes in what respondents said about children's post divorce relationships. These include: communication and



boundaries, children and mothers' expectations of each others' behaviours and actions, mothers' images of children's roles and rights, changes in mothers' roles and life styles, the influence of other circumstances on children's relationships with family and social network members and the impact of father loss. Some of these themes are related, therefore I will occasionally discuss them under one heading.

### ***Relationships with mothers***

This section discusses children's and mothers' perceptions of how divorce affected their relationships with each other. Children's views of how parental separation affected their relationships with mothers were diverse. Nine out of 25 children associated separation with improvements in their relationships with their mothers, six associated it with deterioration in relationships, six said their relations with mothers were mixed, while four reported no changes.

### **Boundaries and Communication Styles**

From an analysis of respondents' accounts, it became evident that for six families in the study, boundaries in post-divorce mother-child relationships became less rigid. Children in such families were largely older boys and girls. According to the children's mothers, the absence of fathers in the homes made them closer to their children, particularly as some of the fathers were no longer able to insist on distant relationships between children and mothers.

Several mothers revealed that they communicated with their children more openly and involved them in family issues. There were no longer rigid boundaries between generations as there had been prior to the divorce. Both children and mothers perceived this change as an improvement in their relationships.

*He used to say I spoil the children by seeking their opinions on family issues, so I ended up not doing so. Now because he no longer stays with us, I involve my children in family issues. They help me a lot, and they have matured a lot as well.....*

The above quote shows perceptions that some fathers had of children's participation. These were based on beliefs / images that children must not be given the right to express their opinions, which in this case was not a view shared by the mother though some women in the study did hold this view too.

Another process that was associated with less rigid boundaries between some children and mothers is that with increased loneliness and the need for emotional support, a few mothers turned to their children, who then became confidants and companions. Children in turn provided advice and emotional support.

*.....After we stopped staying with my father, my mother used to cry a lot. One day I asked her why she was crying and she said it was because my dad has took everything that she had and the car she was still paying for and he left us with nothing. So I just told her that God will take care of us because he knows that my father did not do the right thing..... (Daisy, girl aged 14)*

Although Daisy believed father absence made her closer to her mother, her sibling, a 11 year old boy, who apparently prior to the divorce had always received favourable treatment from his father than his siblings did not hold that view.

*.....Sometimes when my mother talks to me angrily, there is no one to stop her. My father used to do that, but now he is not here. My mother likes to say that daddy spoiled me.....and she wants me to be a clever boy, but I don't like it when he talks to me angrily...*

Although some children gave mothers advice, mothers did not always favour the advice provided. For example, one child advised her mother (whose ex-husband wanted reconciliation) not to agree, but the mother was interested in reconciliation as well. The mother's perception of her child's advice as 'not good' is not surprising because not only do parents and children have personal differences, they also differ in age and historical experiences. Therefore, they do not always share the same view of reality.

Troubles in marriages were sources of anxiety and frustration for mothers and this affected children. The end of violence in the home therefore is one other process through which boundaries loosened between mothers and children. A few boys and girls pointed out that the end of violence made their mothers free from worries and as such able to increase the time and energy devoted to them.

*My relationship with my mother improved a bit after we stopped staying with my father. The reason why I am saying that is because when we stayed with my father, he always beat my mother, and my mother used to spend some time crying and depressed. When she was depressed, she was not able to laugh and smile with us, and that was not good.....Now I am happy about life in the family because when I have problems, I can talk to my mother and she helps me. In the past, even if I talked*



*to her, she was not able to help me because she was worried most of the time about the violence..... (Antony, aged 19).*

Their mothers' corroborated children's accounts, as shown by the below words of Antony's mother.

*I get along better with my children now than during the time when we were staying with their father.....*

### Changes in mothers' roles and life styles

Several children attributed changes in their relationships with mothers to changes in mothers' roles and lifestyles. Six children, for example, reported that their relationships with their mothers became less close because of changes in mothers' roles and involvement in hectic work schedules.

*.....I spend less time with my mother because she works many hours. I would like to spend more time with her and discuss with her some things .(Moemedi, boy aged 12).*

*Interviewer: What kind of things would you like to discuss with your mother?*

*Moemedi: Just anything, like things that make me sad... But when she come home, most of the time, she is tired and she is not able to listen....Sometimes when she comes from work, she finds us sleeping and then she leaves very early the next day....*

However, this was not always something of which the mothers were aware. For example, Moemedi's mother did not report any changes in relationships.

*Interviewer: Have any changes taken place in your relationship with your child after the separation?*

*Mother : Which child. Do you mean the one we have been talking about today?*

*Interviewer: Yes.*

*Mother : No, I can't remember any changes. My relationship with him is just okay.*

Moemedi's concern that he spent little time with his mother should be understood in the context of the relationship he had with his mother prior to the separation. His mother was a housewife, and his father worked as a driver. Quite often his father was away from home on long trips, therefore Moemedi not only spent most of the time with his mother and also reported that he had a close relationship with her.

Another process that children perceived as having adversely influenced their relations with mothers was their mothers' changed roles in discipline. With the fathers' absence from the homes, a few mothers adopted a stricter approach than formerly. Because they were not accustomed to this, children reported feelings of sadness and difficulties in adjusting to the behaviour. This is illustrated by the following exchange between the interviewer and Catherine who perceived her relationship with her mother prior to the divorce as 'just okay'.

*Interviewer: Are there any changes that took place in your relationship with your mother since your father left?*

*Catherine, aged 17: My relationship with my mother, I think it has changed. Ummm, I think she worries a lot that we are not going to pass at school. Because she worries, she always talks to us angrily about schoolwork. She is also very strict with us these days.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that?*

*Catherine: Ummm, like when I visit my friends, she wants to know whom I am visiting and when I will come home. She always wants me to spend very little time with my friends. When I spent a long time visiting my friends, she tells me that she will not allow me to visit friends again. She says that I had a child when I was very young, and I should not play around like a person does not have a child, because if I do so, I am going to have another one. ....She also says friends will make me fail at school.....*

By adopting such kind of responses, mothers tried to maintain control. They feared that children might misbehave in the absence of fathers and as such were trying to achieve compliance with rules and good manners on the part of their children, particularly if they believed their children were misbehaving deliberately because they knew that no one would discipline them. They believed their actions were sincere, genuine and that they were acting in the best interests of the children as shown by the following words of Catherine's mother.

*.....one other problem that I have with these children is that since their father left, they do whatever they want. They don't listen to me. I have tried to be strict by telling them to stop the things they are doing, but it looks like I am not getting anywhere. I love them and I am trying to do the best I can to make them grow up into responsible adults, but they don't care.....*



Although mothers interpreted their strict behaviour with children as for the 'benefit of the children', children held a different view. For example, to children, sometimes anger meant that the mothers had no interest in them.

*Interviewer: You said your mother likes to talk to you angrily, what does her anger mean to you?*

*Catherine: It means she has lost interest in me because I have had a child who has no father. Most of the time when she is angry with me, she says I should not bring another child without a father to her home.*

When mothers got angry with children, some children became afraid. Consequently, children's fear affected communication between them and their mothers. Children avoided bringing up certain issues in fear of their mothers' responses, and this may adversely affect their adjustment, not only to divorce, but also to future stressful events that they may experience. This is particularly so because research indicates that children's positive adjustment to transitions is enhanced when they (among other things) have a supportive / close relationship with the resident parent (cf. Maccoby et al, 1993).

Divorce led to changes in some mothers' lifestyles and this adversely affected relationships in the family. One child who reported that her relationship with her mother deteriorated after the separation attributed this to the fact that she did not like what her mother was doing. When asked what her mother was doing, Nonofu, a 14-year-old girl who viewed her relationship with her mother prior to the separation as better than that between her and her father said:

*It is difficult to say it, but I hope you will not tell her.*

*Interviewer: no, I won't.*

*Nonofu: I always see some men visiting her, and I don't think it is good for her to be visited by different male friends. One time, she told me that my father left her because he had female friends, so when I saw her having different male friends, I asked her if it is okay for someone to do that. She became angry with me and said I was not speaking to her like a child should speak to her mother. She also told me never to talk to her like that again. So from that time on, every time when her friends were around, I did not like it, and she used to say I am a bad child because I did not greet and respect her friends.....*

Nonofu's response to her mothers' actions (confrontation) is striking especially in a society that discourages children from questioning actions of parents and that

emphasises obedience and respect of adults by children. The response is therefore unusual.

The last sentence of Nonofu's words show that some parents do not expect children to show respect to them only, but to other adults as well. Nonofu's mother believed that children should not show their likes and dislikes. Not only did she expect Nonofu to behave as if she liked her friends, but also held images of children as not having the right to express their views. To the mother, the child's dislike of her friends was a sign of bad manners. This suggests that a parent's expectations and images that she has of children can create stress to children. While in most cases parents are free to tell children that they do not like their friends, it was not acceptable for children to manifest the same behaviour. This reflects a lack of reciprocity in some parent-child relationships.

According to both Nonofu and her mother, during the pre-separation period, Nonofu's father did not treat Nonofu as nicely as he treated her younger sister because he said she was not his biological child. Therefore her mother was protective of Nonofu and did her best to make her realise that even though her father did not love her, she did. After divorce, Nonofu's relationship with her mother was complicated by her mother's busy social life / lifestyle, and this disappointed Nonofu. The mother literally had little time for her children, and this was unfortunate for Nonofu who had during the pre-separation period suffered discrimination from her father. This story shows that relationships can be complex and dynamic.

#### Influence of other circumstances on the mother-child relationship

Some of the issues that mothers and children perceived to have had some influence on their relations with each other are: the presence of stepfathers, mothers' emotional reactions to the divorce and their inability to provide positive feedback to children. Out of the four children who lived with step fathers after divorce, two reported that their stepfathers' influence on their relationships with mothers was positive as shown by the case below that the author compiled based on the child and his mother's accounts.

Pitso was a 14-year-old boy who lived in a cohabiting family. He had a younger brother aged nine. Prior to the children's stay with their stepfather, their mother used



to be lonely largely because she was distressed by divorce. She offered little or no recreational support to them. After his mother began a relationship with Pitso's stepfather, her emotional wellbeing improved. She began to be jolly and increased the amount of time she spent playing with children. Pitso's mother believed in open communication between family members, irrespective of the children's ages. Before she started cohabiting, she communicated with the children and sought their opinions. They gave her the go ahead, but as time went on, problems arose in the relationship between Pitso and his stepfather, as the boy had adjustment problems. Like Pitso's mother, his stepfather also believed in open communication. The family therefore discussed the problems in time before things got too bad and was able to sort them out.

The other two children who lived in stepfamilies viewed the influence of stepfathers on their relationships with mothers in negative terms.

*Interviewer: You mentioned earlier that before your father stopped staying with you, you did not get along well with your mother, has the situation changed after divorce?*

*Kabelo, boy aged 19: No. I think that after dad stopped staying with us, the situation got worse. Things got worse after my mother found a man with whom she is staying. She has a child with him. She started to be hostile and angry with me saying I do not show respect to the man she lives with. She also started to criticise me for many things..... My stepfather does not like me and I know he is the one who makes my mother to treat me more badly.....(child cried) .*

Kabelo's poor relationship with his parents is not a new phenomenon. It was prevalent during the period prior to the separation. Not only did he perceive his relationship with his parents prior to separation in negative terms, he also perceived that between him and his siblings in similar terms. In addition, he was both a victim of parental violence and a witness. He therefore experienced multiple stressors.

A comparison of Kabelo and his sister's ( a girl aged 16) account on how her stepfather's presence in the home affected their relationship with their mother showed different views. Kabelo's sister, for example, did not associate her stepfather's presence with major difficulties in her relationship with her mother as shown by the below exchange between her and the interviewer.

*Kabelo's sister: ....and he has a small child with my mother and he loves that child more than he loves us. He always buys nice things for her, but not for us. I get on*

*well with him, but not very well...*

*Interviewer: Do you think staying with your stepfather has affected the way you get along with your mother?*

*Kabelo's sister: No, not really, just a little bit. Only because now my mother likes to spend more time chatting with him, than with us...*

The differences in Kabelo and his sibling's accounts of how their stay with a stepfather affected their relationship with their mother should be understood in the context of Kabelo's pre-separation experiences. He unlike his sister had lived an unhappy life in the family for many years as shown earlier in the chapter. He had even tried to commit suicide as a result of all the stressful experiences he went through.

Different perceptions of the influence of stepfamily life on children's wellbeing were not only held by siblings, some mothers held them as well. For instance, two children in cohabiting families perceived their stepfathers as sources of stress to them, but their mothers did not see it that way. As will be shown by the words of Kabelo's mother later, she did not perceive the stepfather as a problem that exacerbated her bad relationship with the child, instead she perceived Kabelo as a problem. From both Kabelo and his mother's words, below, we see that each blames the other.

*Mother: My relationship with my children is okay, except with one - the one you will talk to tomorrow. He is a difficult child.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that?*

*Mother: Ah, he says I don't love him as I love other children. He will tell you everything tomorrow, and maybe after he tells you his problems, you will be able to help him because you say you have a background in social work.....*

Not only were children's relationships with mothers perceived to be influenced by the presence of stepfathers, they were also perceived to be influenced by mothers' emotional reactions to the divorce. Unlike the decision to marry which is taken by two co-operating adults, that is not the case with the decision to divorce. Consequently, several mothers who did not wish the divorce to take place reported that they were distressed during the separation period as well as after. According to them, this had adverse effects on both their parenting skills and their relationships



with their children. They reported that their ability to respond adequately to their children's needs was affected.

*Interviewer: Did divorce have any effect on your relationship with your child?*

*Mother: Yes, I think it did.. My relationship with him and his siblings was affected to a large extent immediately after their father stopped staying with us, now it is better.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about how the relationship was affected?*

*Mother: Well, as I told you earlier, although I knew that their father had a girlfriend, I did not believe he would go to an extent of leaving the family. I kept hoping that his affair with the woman would stop. So when he moved out, I became very sad. I think the children were even aware of my sadness. I remember they used to come home with their homework asking me to help them, but most of the time, I was not able to because I was depressed. .... After several months, I became better because I had talked to a counsellor. Working as a nurse helped me to be aware that counselling can help me. Now my relationship with them is better.*

The above mother's account is striking because she not only acknowledges the problem, but also accepts some responsibility. The account also shows that divorce and its related stresses affected her ability to interact with her children effectively, at least on a temporary basis. This finding supports that of previous research (cf. Camara and Resnick, 1988; Wallerstein et al, 1988) that shows that during the period of separation and two years following, there is a disruption in the parent-child relationship as parents are likely to be physically and psychologically unavailable.

Lastly, some children viewed their mothers' inability to provide them with positive feedback as having adversely affected relationships between them and their mothers. They pointed out that they were rarely praised for achievements, nor told good things about themselves. They felt that their mothers were more aware of and responded to the things they did not do well, than to those they did well. The absence of positive feedback and the presence of criticism at a time when children were undergoing stress had serious implications for the emotional wellbeing of children.

Several mothers also revealed that they did not provide positive feedback to children, but they did not view this behaviour as having had adverse effects on their relationship with children, as children did. Some of them pointed out that they did not provide children with positive feedback because they believed that telling

children good things about themselves would adversely affect their attitudes towards life, especially to hard work.

*.....most of the time I don't tell them anything good about themselves because if you tell a child something good about himself, he will relax and say, I am good at that thing so there is no need for me to put more effort.....Again you know we were not raised that way, and I believe that is why we take life so seriously.....*

Others just did not consider it important to provide children with positive feedback. From mothers' responses to the question 'Who told the child good things about herself / himself?', it seems as if positive feedback is not in the vocabulary of mothers as shown by their responses below.

*I don't know about that .*

*I think her friends, I am not sure, she will tell you.*

*No one.*

One key theme that cuts across relationships that were characterised as ambivalent and those characterised as deteriorating is that children generally were not able to discuss emotionally sensitive issues and issues that worried them with their mothers. Mothers withheld information from children and children concealed feelings. Although these strategies to some extent prevented overt conflict in the face of deteriorating relationships, they created problems for children. Consequently, mothers viewed the absence of overt conflict as a sign of harmonious relationships and positive coping, while children had hidden sad feelings within them. This process results in part from shared expectations (reinforced by mothers' attitude) that children: should not criticise, should convey happiness and respect regardless of their feelings.

## ***Relationships with fathers***

### **Extent and nature of contact with father**

Existing research shows that both the quantity and quality of most children's relationships with fathers change following separation, particularly that they have less contact with them. Father-child relationships have been found to be less close in divorced than in married families ( cf. Peterson and Zill, 1986; Hetherington, 1993).



Despite this trend, research by several scholars (cf. Hetherington et al, 1978; Spigelman et al, 1994) attests to the benefits of continued contact with fathers after divorce, provided there are no other substantial sources of stress such as conflict between parents. From their American and Swedish studies, these authors noted that continued contact between children and fathers is related to positive adjustment, especially with boys.

Although research in other countries shows the benefits of continued contact between children and fathers, children and mothers in this study reported great declines in children's contact with their fathers after the separation period. Both children who perceived their relationships with fathers before separation as 'not close' (majority) as well as the minority who perceived them as 'close' lost touch with fathers. This finding confirms that of Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) and Kruk (1994) that showed that even some fathers who were close to children before divorce lose contact. These authors contend that this partly emanates from fathers' attempts to distance themselves from painful feelings of loss.

### Frequency of contact

Sixteen out of 25 children in this study said they saw their fathers less than five times a year; four said they never saw their fathers; three said they saw them once a month; one said he saw him once a week and one child said he saw his father every day except during weekends. A majority of the 16 children who said they met fathers less than five times a year said the contact was usually by chance, not planned. Only one child reported maintaining contact with her father by telephone, in addition to the rare and unplanned face to face contact and none reported letter writing.

### Why fathers were seldom seen

According to mothers and children, several factors explain why a majority of children rarely saw their fathers. First, some fathers had new families and as such devoted more time, attention and resources to such families. Old families were no longer a priority to them.

Some children pointed out that their mothers' attitudes towards contact with fathers discouraged them from seeing their fathers. All mothers except one, however, denied

discouraging their children from seeing their fathers. Contrary to this, four children said their mothers discouraged them from seeing their fathers. Previous research (cf. Warshak and Santrock, 1983; Walczak and Burns, 1984) has also found that reduction in children's contact with their fathers partly arose from custodial parents' refusal to allow children to keep in touch with their fathers.

Other mothers neither discouraged nor encouraged children to maintain contact with their fathers. This neutral behaviour according to most children made them uncertain as to whether and when it was appropriate to request permission to visit their fathers. As a result, they rarely requested such permission. Children assumed that their mothers' neutral behaviour was intended to discourage them from initiating discussion on contact with their fathers, while mothers did not view it as such. Here we see another example of ambiguities that can be created by non-communication.

Children's view of their mothers' neutral behaviour as serving to discourage them from initiating discussion about contact should be understood in the context of images that some children in Botswana have of adulthood, especially parenthood. They view adults as powerful and having control in their relationships with them, and as such believe that challenging them or acting against their wishes is not good. These images arise from the fact that Botswana children generally are raised under conditions that emphasize respect and obedience towards adults (Brown, 1977).

Another reason why fathers' contact with children drastically declined according to mothers and children was because most of them no longer stayed in close proximity to children. Some children (both girls and boys who viewed their pre-separation relationships with fathers as close) reported that they hesitated to maintain contact with their fathers because they anticipated that they would be discriminated against in the new household.

*.....Although I know where he stays and how I can get there, I cannot visit him because he lives with another woman....., and I know that the woman will not like to see me or even my siblings. We cannot live with them because they will not treat us well. (Catherine, aged 17)*

Some mothers also held the same view about children's visits to fathers who were staying with other women. In Catherine's mother's account below, we see that she was trying to protect the child from unfair treatment or discrimination.



*As a woman who has children, I know that it is not easy for another woman to treat another's children as she treats hers...So I don't want my children to be discriminated against by that woman. That is why I don't allow them to visit their father.*

### What children missed as a result of father absence

Children who had close relationships with their fathers prior to the divorce yearned for a better relationship and more contact. They missed the material support that fathers provided them with. They also missed the interventions fathers used to make when their encounters with their mothers and / or with siblings were conflictual.

*Interviewer: Throughout the interview, you said that you miss your father. Could you tell me what exactly you miss about him?*

*Malebogo, aged 14: He was a good parent to us. Sometimes when my mother talked to us angrily, he told her that she was not doing the right thing, and that although we had wronged her, she should talk to us in a calm manner. He was also buying clothes and food for us. That is why I say I miss him. But, my siblings when I tell them that I miss my father, they ask me what he is doing to me that makes me miss him. They say that because he is not taking care of them, they don't miss him.*

For other children, fathers not only intervened in conflict situations and provided material support, they also provided educational support, informational support, recreational support, as well as a sense of security and stability to them. This is illustrated by the following exchange between Aron (who was apparently the only child in the study who had daily contact - except during weekends - with his father). Aron's words show that he preferred to literally stay with his father full-time rather than only to see him on a part-time basis.

*Interviewer: Is there anything you miss now which you had when your parents were still staying together?*

*Aron, boy aged 13: Yes. I just miss my father only.....I want him to stay with us.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that?*

*Aron: Yes. Ummm, I just miss him. It is not nice to stay in a family, which has only a mother. People outside the family know that there is no man in the house and they can do whatever they want because they know that no one is strong. One time, thieves stole our TV and Video machines night when we were sleeping. But they did not steal from our neighbours because there is a man in that house.*

*Interviewer: I can understand your concern. Is there anything besides what you just said that you miss regarding your fathers' absence?*



*Aron : He used to play snooker with me. Now when I ask my brother to play with me, sometimes, he says he is tired. He doesn't like snooker as much as my father and me.*

Although some children who did not have close relationships with fathers before divorce said they did not care about contact with their fathers, they also revealed that the decline in contact with their fathers meant the absence of financial support and this worried them. The relationship between paternal involvement and poorer economic status was also found by Seltzer (1991) in an American study. It became clear from children's accounts that while some children missed their fathers' presence, and the social, psychological, recreational, material and financial support they used to provide to them, some only missed the material support. The fact that both groups of children missed the material support from their fathers indicates the crucial role that fathers played as the main providers of material support to their families.

#### Quality of relationships with father after divorce

Contact with fathers does not necessarily mean children perceived the relationships as good. Several children still perceived the relationships as not close just as they were before the divorce. When asked to elaborate on their responses, some children said:

*Sometimes when I come from fetching water from the standpipe or when I come from the shop, I see him. I just greet him and then I go. We never talk about anything, we just exchange greetings only. Even when he was still staying with us, we used not to talk a lot, he talked to us only when he sent us to do something... ..(Katlego, a girl aged 17 whose parents separated four years prior to the interview)*

*I just meet him in the streets, and sometimes when I greet him, he does not respond. It pains me to see that my own father ... (Antony, boy aged 19 whose experience of separation was 4 years prior to the interview).*

A few children (three from different families) attributed a deterioration in relationships with fathers to the escalated violence that their fathers imposed on their mothers during and after the separation period. This finding parallels that of Buchanan and colleagues, 1996, who from their research on adolescents after divorce in America found that circumstances of high inter-parental conflict make it difficult for adolescents to develop or sustain close relationships with their non-custodial



parents. Findings that some children continue to witness parental violence during the separation are disturbing because violence has been found to have adverse effects on children (cf. Emery, 1982; Cummings and Davies, 1994 ).

Not only did most children report deteriorating relationships with fathers after divorce, they also strongly felt that fathers were sources of stress to them because they did not financially support them after divorce.

*Interviewer: Earlier you said your father used to beat your mother before the separation, and that made you feel sad. After divorce, could you tell me what made you sad?*

*Kagiso, girl aged 21 whose parents separated 3 to 4 years prior to the interview: My father again.*

*Interviewer: Could you tell me more about that*

*Kagiso: Because he does not give us money to buy food and clothes.....*

One child pointed out that what distressed him most about his relationship with his father was that when he visited his father, his father did not show interest in him. As shown by the following words, what mattered to the child was not only the material support, but the attention, love and interest that he expected to receive from his father.

*He sometimes gives me money, but sometimes he does not. What make me very sad is not the money he does not give me, but is that he sometimes leaves me in the house alone for a whole weekend when I had visited him..... (Kabelo, boy aged 19)*

Reduced contact between children and fathers did not mean a deterioration in children's relationships with fathers for all children. One child who had stayed in a violent home prior to the divorce, and who perceived his relationship with his father during that time as not close pointed out that he now feared their father less.

*Interviewer: You said earlier that you used to fear your father a lot because he used to beat your mother. Now that you no longer stay with him, how do you get along with him?*

*Joseph, aged 13: ..... I don't fear him as much as I used to. .... I am able to visit him. Again he no longer talks angrily to me. The only thing I don't like about seeing him is that he does not give me money.....*

Three children noted that recently their fathers had renewed contact. This evoked different reactions. One of the children who continued to have a close relationship with his father after separation had a positive attitude towards the contact.

*.....I see him every day. He picks me up every day after school, and sometimes I go with him to his office. Sometimes he takes me home, and sometimes we eat lunch in town. I like spending time with him....( Aron, aged 13).*

The second child who perceived his pre-separation relationship with her father as not close voiced indifference about having contact with her father.

*It does not matter to me if he comes to see us or if he does not come.. (Daisy, aged 14)*

And the third who also viewed his pre-separation relationship with her father as not close pointed out that the re-establishment of contact served to worsen the already strained relationship with her father.

*When I see him, I think of the violence he used to inflict on my mother.... (Lizzy, aged 16)*

It should be highlighted at this point that information presented here about father-child contact as well as the quality of their relationships was based on children and mothers' accounts, not on information provided by fathers. Obtaining information from fathers might have produced different views, as people's perceptions of reality are not always the same.

### ***Relationships with siblings***

Accounts of some children and mothers indicated that divorce not only led to changes in parent-child relationships, it also led to changes in some siblings' relationships. Little is known about sibling relationships in families with divorced parents. Some scholars (cf. Pfouts, 1976; Dunn, 1983) have argued that sibling relationships are characterised by both supportive and antagonistic behavior. These features were found among siblings in this study, as will be shown later in the chapter. More mothers than children viewed children's relationships with siblings in negative terms. Mothers were generally not aware of the support that siblings offered to each other / the importance of siblings to each other, therefore in this section, I will



rely more on children's accounts rather than mothers'.

### Issues of attachment and support

Relationships between siblings as well as the support that siblings offered to each other were found to be partly dependent on whether siblings' perceptions of stressful events were the same. For example, in this study, several siblings had different relationships with fathers prior to the separation. Consequently, when those who perceived their relationships with fathers as close sought support from those who did not perceive the relations as such, the latter were often not supportive to the former.

*When I tell my sister that I miss my father, she laughs at me, and tells me that I should not worry about my father because he no longer cares about me. She tells me that she does not miss him because he has not done anything good to him.... (Peter, aged 12).*

There was however an increase in support offered by older girls when mothers could no longer afford to hire maids due to low income and those who no longer stayed with mothers after separation) to younger ones. Older girls, for example, reported that they started to provide instrumental support to their younger siblings. They also provided information and emotional support to their younger siblings. The gender differences that existed in relation to the provision of instrumental support should be understood in terms of differences in the socialisation of girls and boys in Botswana as shown the previous chapters.

With the absence of the father - who in a few families was perceived to be favouring one child and not others, three of the six children who prior to the separation perceived their relationships with siblings as not close because their fathers treated them differently felt their relationships with siblings were improving. One child attributed the improvements to his father's absence from the homes while two associated the improvements with the absence of both her father and mother from the home.

*Interview: You said earlier that when your father was still staying with you, he treated you differently from your siblings, and this made your siblings and your mother unhappy. How do you get along with your siblings now that your father no longer stays with you?*

*Malebogo, girl aged 14 whose parents separated close to 3 years prior to the interview: Ummm. We now live with grandma, and my mother works in town. Because I am the older one and I do most things for them, my brothers and sisters now respect me. I don't know if they will continue to do so when we live with my mother. My mother has found a better job and she told us that she will stay with us in town.*

Nonofo, a girl aged 14 whose parents separated between two and three years prior to the interview also expressed improvements in her relationship with siblings.

*Since my parents stopped staying together, I get along better with my siblings.... I used to feel jealous at my younger sister when my father bought her nice things, and did not buy me anything. Now no one treats me unfairly, our mother treats us equally and that is why I say I get on better with my younger sister.*

The above words show that some children associated their stay with a parent who did not treat them equally with poor relationships between them and their siblings. In the absence of such a parent, siblings got on better with each other. These findings are in line with research evidence (cf. Corter et al, 1983 and Kosonen, 1996) which suggests that the presence of a parent reduces sibling interaction and that children get on better with their siblings on their own. Similarly, Bank and Kahn (1982: 262) hypothesized that 'insufficient parental influence' promotes the development of strong sibling bonds. This can be so because parents have been found to contribute to sibling rivalry through their favoring of one sibling (cf. Ross and Milgram, 1982).

### Perceived sibling rivalry

Compared to the period before separation, children reported few instances of sibling rivalry, especially as the fathers (who were said to originate and maintain rivalrous feelings) were no longer staying with them. However two boys reported feelings of rivalry against their older siblings because their mothers were not treating them equally. The unequal treatment resulted from role substitution. After the father's departure, for example, mothers in two families gave the first born more responsibility and authority in the home. Younger siblings therefore resented the way their relationship with older siblings changed.

*I don't like it when my mother allows Gabriel to talk to us the way he wants. He is acting as if he is my father. When I have not done something properly, he is the one who tells me, not my mother. I don't know why....He also likes to talk to me angrily like he is my parent..... (Aron, aged 13 ).*



Botswana is a patriarchal society, so this may explain why the two boys who were given power and control over younger siblings found it easy to exercise it. Gender was not the only factor that eased children's acceptability of parent roles, another factor that had an influence was birth order. For example, the two adolescents who were given parent responsibilities were the oldest in their families.

Although the foregoing discussion has separated discussions of attachment and support from that of sibling rivalry, in reality these experiences are not mutually exclusive. In other words, friendly behaviour, rivalry, comfort, provocation, as well as support quite often characterize the same sibling relationship. It is therefore misleading to conceptualise the sibling relationship in terms of unitary dimensions of support and rivalry, as it is common for siblings to show both supportive and rival behaviour towards each other.

### Durability of relationships

Siblings who were separated from each other after separation had relationships, which were not stable or durable. They saw each other less often and were not able to provide each other with support, care and love. Geographical distance was perceived as reducing contact and feelings of closeness. However, children tried hard to maintain contact with absent siblings, particularly since they believed sibling relationships were permanent. All the four children who were separated from their siblings as a result of divorce perceived the separation as negative. According to mothers, the courts in all the four families did not order such separation, but the children's fathers just took one of the children. Children pointed out that they missed their siblings a lot. They were no longer able to participate in shared activities and interests. Separation from siblings also denied children the support they used to receive from their siblings. One of the older adolescent boys, Kamogelo aged 19, whose parents separated about 3 years prior to the interview, for example, said:

*Before my father took my younger sister, I was very close to her. We used to talk about the unhappiness that was in our family, and many other things that worried us, but now I don't have anyone to talk to. We used to go together to school and to church and come back together, now I go alone.....(child cried). Now I rarely see her. I mean we no longer live in the same village. Sometimes I go to see her, but I come back very sad because my fathers' relatives are not treating her well. Again he*

*never asks about my mother and this pains me a lot. I think they have bewitched her so that she does not think of my mother, because of this, I don't think she will ever stay with us again.....*

The fact that the above child believed that her sister would never stay with them again because she had been bewitched should be understood in the context of some Batswana's fears about witchcraft. Generally people fear to challenge situations that are associated with witchcraft because they believe terrible things will happen to them. They also tend to believe that once a person has bewitched another, it becomes almost impossible to reverse the situation. This discussion shows that mothers and children in this study were not only trying to cope with divorce and its related changes, but were also trying to cope with the tensions of living in a society undergoing transition.

### ***Relationships with relatives***

In this section, I discuss respondents' perceptions of how divorce affected children's relationships with relatives. I will firstly focus on maternal grandparents, as they are relatives who were reported to have had more frequent contact with children after divorce. Thereafter, I will focus on children's relationships with other relatives.

#### **Maternal kin**

Several children and mothers were of the view that after divorce, maternal grandmothers increased contact with children, especially during the time immediately following divorce. However, they said contact declined with time. The nature of relationships between children and maternal grandparents varied depending on several circumstances. These include whether grandmothers were staying full time with children, grandmother's relationships with the children's mothers, mothers' resources, as well as the distance between where grandmothers stayed and where children stayed. How these circumstances shaped grandmother-child relations will be highlighted later in the chapter. Children's grandmothers had different amounts of contact with children and this was associated with different roles. Some (six) had daily contact with children as they stayed with them on a full time basis, while others (the majority) had contact with children on a part-time basis. The role of grandmothers is a major theme that the researcher found to be playing a vital part in shaping the child-grandmother relationship.



### Grandmothers' roles

All the six grandmothers who stayed with children full time after divorce were described by mothers as playing the role of parents to the children. They acted as parents because they met the daily needs of children, such as disciplining them, supervising them and meeting their health needs. Two of the children (both girls) perceived their relationships with maternal grandmothers as good and as better than their relationships with their mothers as shown by the case below.

Malebogo, a 14 year old girl and her siblings stayed with their maternal grandmother after their parents divorced because their mother was working in a hectic and low paid job and could not afford to stay with them in town. The adolescent liked her grandmother and was happy to stay with her. When asked what she liked about staying with grandma, Malebogo said:

*...She does not criticise me like my mother. She is good to me....I am also able to talk to her about many things, and she gives me advice. Also when I have told her something that is secret, she does not tell other people like my mother. She also does not blame and criticise me all the time like my mother. My mother is not like that.....*

When asked what grandmother likes about her, she said

*I perform most chores in the home because I am the older child, I help her with washing and other things.....*

The above words show that the relationship between Malebogo and her grandmother was characterised by reciprocity.

The other four children perceived their relationships with grandmothers in negative terms. This seems to relate to their expectations. They said they expected grandmothers to be nice, kind and loving and did not like it when they disciplined them. When asked to elaborate, one of the adolescents said.

*..... She helped us and provided us with things that we needed just like my mother. My mother bought food for us in town so we just lived a normal life. Well sometimes, the food got finished before the month ended, but we waited until it ended and my mother brought food. She was just like my mother, she liked to be strict with us. She said she did not want to spoil us because my mother would blame her... ..She always said that children nowadays don't have good morals and because she wanted us to have good morals, that is why she is strict with us. Again, I just didn't like staying in the rural area because we were many. My grandmother also stayed with my two aunts' children..... (Kagiso, girl aged 21)*



*Interviewer: How did you want grand ma to treat you?*

*Kagiso: Nicely, like she used to before we stayed with her. During the time she visited us, she used to be very nice to us, now she is strict, she says my mother told her that she should not spoil because we don't have a father.....*

The above experience of some children who stayed with grandmothers full time shows that when grandmothers assume the role of full time guardians, they are likely to use the same parenting styles that are used by mothers, particularly if mothers influence their parenting practices as shown in the above words of Kagiso. Implicit in Kagiso's words is the issue of control. It seems just that children's mothers, some grandmothers wanted to exercise control over children. They were concerned that children would misbehave and then mothers would blame them, as a result they became stricter with the children. It is therefore not surprising that visiting grandmothers (as will be shown later in the chapter) were perceived in more positive terms by children.

For a majority of children in the study, the role played by their maternal grandmothers was not that of full time primary carers, but that of part-time carers. Children perceived such grandparents as fun to be with and reported that they felt free to tell them their worries and concerns. In other words, grandmothers provided recreational and emotional support. They did not discipline children as the ones who stayed with children full time did. Children also reported that they valued grandparents' non-judgmental attitudes and felt secure when with them.

*..She is good. I enjoy being with her, she does not get angry at me...She has changed a lot because immediately after my parents stopped staying together we stayed with her and sometimes she was not good to us...She was strict, now she is okay.....  
(Grace, aged 21 whose experience of parental separation was four years prior to the interview )*

*I like spending time with her because she does not blame and criticise me, She does not talk to me angrily and she does not criticise me....I like to be with her because she can laugh and pass jokes, my mother does not do that..... (Catherine, aged 17 whose parents separated a year prior to the interview )*

Children's views of their relationships with visiting / part-time grandmothers as positive might stem from the fact that the grandmothers were not playing the role of full time parents which included disciplining children and setting rules. It is possible that grandmothers felt inhibited to discipline children in their mothers' homes



because it was not their own territory. Johnson (1988) in his American study of grandparents, parents and children's adjustment to divorce, has also found this line of thinking. She found that grand mothers in her study favoured disciplining children in their own homes, not in the homes of the children's mothers.

### *Other circumstances that influenced relations between children and grandmothers*

Besides grandmothers' roles, relationships between children and grandmothers also appeared to be influenced by several other factors. These are distance between children's places of residence and grandmothers', mothers' resources, and relationships between grandmothers and their divorced daughters. About eight children and their mothers in this study reported that relationships and contact with grandmothers continued unchanged after divorce, but they continued to be distant, just like before divorce. Grandmothers in this group's ability to develop frequent and close relationships with children were limited by three factors. First, the long distances between the two. Second, lack of financial resources to travel. Unlike research from America (see for example, Johnson, 1988), that shows that grandparents often provided financial support to their divorced adult children which consequently benefited grandchildren, this was not the case for children in this study. Instead, most grandmothers financially depended on their adult children including divorced women in this study. Third, mothers' relationship with grandmothers also influenced grand-mother-child contact and relationship.

Children whose mothers reported little contact with their parents also reported little contact with grandmothers and vice-versa. Four mothers in this group were those who had new partners. According to these mothers, they deliberately had little contact with the children's grandmothers because they feared they would be criticised for their cohabiting practices and this might adversely affect their relations with their parents. They believed that once their parents realised that they were cohabiting, so soon after the divorce, they would believe that they caused the divorce and would blame them. The mothers had new relationships (cohabiting) from which they derived social support, but they failed to recognise children's needs to receive social support from grandmothers. This process shows that although children may benefit from frequent contact with grandmothers, they may be denied that contact by their mothers' practices and beliefs. As it became apparent in two children's accounts,



they expressed wishes for more contact with grandmothers. Mothers' strategy of having little contact with children's grandmothers in order to avoid criticism served to safeguard mothers' rather than children's interests.

This was not the only example that shows that adults in this study sometimes put their needs and interests before children's. Another example is that some mothers reported that as time went on, there was a decline in children's contact with grandmothers because they (the mothers) were coping better with divorce and related experiences. Several children reported reduction in their contact with grandmothers as well, but were not aware of the causes of the reduction. However, it should be noted that grandmothers' role in facilitating mothers' adjustment might benefit children indirectly as mothers' positive adjustment could result in improved relations between them and their children.

Maternal grandmothers were not the only maternal relatives who had contact with children. Other relatives such as grandfathers, uncles and aunts continued to visit children occasionally and also invited them to their houses. They sometimes provided recreational and financial support to children. Grandfathers who were reported to be involved with children were those whose wives were. Some grand fathers stayed at the cattle posts most of the time and therefore did not have frequent contact with children. A few grandfathers were reported to have occasionally provided financial support.

### Paternal kin

Divorce affected the stability of most children's relationships with paternal kin. According to both children and mothers, children's contact with paternal kin greatly declined after divorce. This finding parallels those of existing literature from other countries (cf. Hetherington's 1989 American study and Walczak and Burns's 1984 British study). Several children who had 'close' relationships with some paternal relatives perceived the loss of contact with them as another loss resulting from divorce and felt sad about it. They were no longer in touch with people who were good to them and whom they loved. Not all children experienced drastic reductions in their contact with paternal relatives, two out of six who prior to the separation reported close and supportive relationships reported that this continued.



## ***Relationships with peers and friends***

### **Dispersion and contact**

Divorce resulted in changes of neighbourhoods and schools for most children and this made it difficult for children to keep contact with their old friends and peers as they no longer lived in proximity to each other. Although it is recognised that contact is not only physical but can be maintained through letter and telephone, children generally did not use letters and phones. Only a few children in the study lived in families that had telephones, unlike developed countries where telephones are found in almost every home. The finding that geographical proximity affects children's relationships with friends supports that of Rubin (1980) which shows that school aged-children's friendships are often based on proximity and are difficult to maintain without frequent contact.

Mothers generally were aware that divorce led to children leaving their friends in previous neighbourhoods and schools, but were not aware of the how important established friendships were to children. They simply believed that children made other friends in the new schools and neighbourhoods to replace old ones. Children were able to provide more vivid and detailed accounts of what lack of contact with old friends meant to them than their mothers.

Adolescents in this study felt that divorce and its related changes adversely affected their relationships with friends and felt sad about it. They had close friends, whom they felt comfortable to confide in. The loss of friends to some children meant that there were few people if any to confide in. It took some time before they established new friends. Children's need to confide in close friends increased after separation, but access decreased. They were more concerned about establishing relationships with friends which could be characterized by trust and intimacy.

Change of neighbourhood was not the only circumstance that children associated with changes in relations between them and friends. One child said the prevalence of violence in the home made her feel different from friends and avoid friendship relationships. She worried that the violence would start while her friends visited them, therefore, she did not want her friends to visit her. Previous research, (cf. Cockett and Tripp, 1994) has also shown that living in high-conflict families creates

friendships problems for children.

Not only were children's relationships with friends affected by their experiences after divorce, they were also influenced by experiences prior to the divorce. One child, for example, attributed her lack of friends to the violence that was inflicted on her by her father prior to the separation.

*He used not to allow me from associating with my peers. When he saw me with my age mates, he beat me, so even now, although we no longer stay with him, I still do not have friends.... (Kitso, girl aged 18 who had been sexually, physically and emotionally abused by her father during the pre-separation period)*

### Homogeneity and children's friendships

Homogeneity refers to the extent to which members of a network share common social attributes (Mitchell and Trickett, 1980: 31) such as religious affiliation or socio-economic status. A few children in this study noted that changes in relationships with friends resulted from differences between them and peers. For example, adolescents who experienced a downward shift in their families' economic wellbeing, did not have fashionable clothes, money for snacks, hair creams, perfumes and other things that their peers valued. These differences made it difficult for them to maintain satisfactory relationships.

Religious beliefs and backgrounds also created difficulties in establishing friendships. Two children in this study who were Christians noted this. They believed that because of their Christian beliefs, other children were not interested in becoming friends with them. Similarly, they felt that it was not wise for them to establish friendships with children who were not Christians like them.

### ***Coping with changes in relationships with family and social network members***

This chapter has shown that both mothers and children associated divorce and related processes with changes in children's relationships with family and social network members. Children's perceptions of the changes were diverse. Some viewed them as negative, others as mixed, while others viewed them as positive. In this section, I focus on how children who viewed the changes in relationships as mixed and / or



negative coped with them. Children coped by relying on their own personal, family or network resources.

### Personal coping strategies

Several children relied on their own personal resources to cope with changes in their relationships with family and social network members. The personal coping strategies children used include: wishful thinking, asking fathers to renew contact as well as to increase the financial support they provided to them, positive thinking and internalisation of feelings.

Frydenberg, (1997: 32), contends that 'Wishful thinking is characterised by items based on hope and anticipation of a positive outcome'. This strategy was used by children who perceived their pre-separation relations with fathers as close and / or those who lived in families of higher socio-economic backgrounds prior to separation. Children of various ages who had close relationships with fathers continued to hope and wish for parental reconciliation, irrespective of the number of years since separation.

*.....I wish one day my father could come back and stay with us..... (Maria, girl aged 16 whose parents separated between two and three years prior to the interview)*

*I see my father every day because he picks me up from school.....But I wish he can stay with us..... (Aron, boy aged 13 whose experience of separation was between two and three years before the interview)*

Sibling differences in children's wishes for parental reconciliation were noted. Maria's sibling, a girl aged 14 whose pre-separation relationship with her father was also close reported that she coped by wishful thinking as well. Aron's sibling, a boy aged 16, on the other hand did not have wishes for parental reconciliation. This is not surprising because he perceived his relationship with his father prior to separation as not close.

A few children reported that they kept feelings to themselves. One of the most striking and persistent themes raised by children (both girls and boys) who reported using this strategy was they resorted to internalised coping after receiving un-supportive / negative reactions from their social network members.



*Interviewer: You said earlier that you feel sad because you miss your father. How have you dealt with the feelings?*

*Maria, girl aged 16 whose parents separated between 2 and 3 years prior to the interview who had a close relationship with her father during the pre-separation period: .....I tried to talk to my mother about it. But she said she does not want to talk about my father, and that we should not talk about that person again. He said, my father would visit us when he wants....So I have not talked about it again because she gets annoyed. I just keep quiet. I don't talk about it any more now. I just feel sad and keep quiet.....*

Mothers generally (even those whom children had tried to confide in) were not aware of the extent to which children concealed feelings. Therefore they interpreted children's quietness about their feelings as a sign of 'good coping'. Children (both boys and girls) were trapped by parents' perceptions that silence was a sign of coping well. They felt under pressure to pretend that they were happy by not revealing their feelings. Here we see an existence of an unhelpful cycle, whereby children express unhappiness - mothers are discomforted - children hide feelings and mothers feel better, while the child is still unhappy. This process should be understood in the context of the socialisation of Botswana children that puts much emphasis on obedience and respect towards adults. Adults (particularly mothers) in this study had a tendency to view children as passive recipients (objects) of socialisation rather than as active agents. It is therefore crucial to recognise the power of adult constructions of children in shaping the way children cope with divorce.

Kabelo, a boy aged 19 - whose relationship with his mother continued to be poor after separation said the following words to show that he coped by internalising feelings and concerns.

*I just keep things to myself. There is nothing that I can do because if I tell people, they blame me. I know that if I try to do something to cope, my mother will never stop blaming. So I told myself that it is better to keep things to myself than to indicate to people that I need help.....*

Kabelo's account that he coped by internalising feelings and concerns as a result of past negative responses from his network members has serious implications for his wellbeing, particularly that he underwent multiple stressors both prior to and after separation. He had previously tried to cope by attempting suicide, and was ridiculed by both his parents and relatives for that. They did not take any steps to understand factors that influenced his decision to attempt suicide, but just blamed him for the attempt. Kabelo believed that attempting suicide was not effective. One implication



of his concealment of feelings therefore may be that he can attempt suicide again as the feelings intensify.

The above quotes not only show perceptions of how family and social network members influenced children to use internalised coping, but also show that some mothers believed children had no feelings and / or their feelings were not important and therefore should adhere to their expectations. In other words, they were sensitive to their parents' responses and avoided hurting them. Children's sensitivity to hurting their parents suggests a complex dynamic in the ways in which children may perceive parental authority. From Maria's words for example, we see that she perceived her mother's reaction to divorce communication with her as absolute, and as such did not raise similar divorce related issues with her again.

One child who perceived her relationship with her father prior to separation as close reported that she coped with the distant relationship between her and her father after separation by asking him to renew contact. However, she perceived this method as not effective.

*.....I once wrote to him telling him that I miss him as well as the financial support he used to provide to us. I also told him that my siblings miss him as well, and that he is not doing the right thing by staying without seeing us for so long and not sending us money. He then said I should not talk to him like that and that I don't have good manners. Since that time, I never wrote to him again..... (Catherine, aged 17, whose parents separated a year prior to the interview )*

Once again, we see from the above words an example of images that some parents held of children. Catherine's father got annoyed when his child revealed her feelings to him, and interpreted the child's action as lack of manners. He held the image of children as not entitled to criticise and make demands.

Some children who had mixed feelings about their fathers' departures coped by thinking positively about their circumstances. Focus on the positive is represented by items that indicate a positive and cheerful outlook on the current situation (Frydenberg, 1997: 33). Factors such as age, experiences of or absence of multiple stressors in children's lives both during the pre and post-divorce periods, the quality of pre-separation father-child relationship and time since separation played a role in children's use of positive thinking. For example, this strategy was used by a few older children who did not experience multiple divorce-related stressors, whose



experience of separation was more than three years prior to the period of the interview, as well as who perceived their relations with fathers as not close. Unlike children who used other coping strategies, those who used positive thinking believed it was effective. It is striking that only older adolescents, not younger ones, reported this response. This might be so because older adolescents tend to have a wider range of life experiences and therefore a large number of instances to draw upon in making sense of life stressors.

*Andrew, aged 18 whose parents separated 4 years prior to the interview:.....I just told myself that I am lucky because at least I have one parent. There are other children who do not have parents at all because their parents are dead.*

*Interviewer: Do you think focusing on the positive helped you to cope?*

*Andrew: Yes, a lot. ....*

### Seeking social support

Wills and colleagues (1996:109) defines emotional support as ‘the availability of a person with whom one can discuss problems, share feelings and disclose worries when necessary’. This definition implies that emotional support depends on a person who can listen effectively and who can reflect about problems without blame and criticism. Talking about emotional problems involves revealing negative aspects of the self, so most people only feel comfortable about revealing to people they feel close to. Emotional support facilitates adjustment because it makes one feel accepted and valued by another person (Wills, 1985). In other words, it boosts one’s self-esteem.

Several children who had close relationships with fathers as well as a few who reported mixed relationships with fathers before separation reported that they first turned to mothers to try to discuss their worries about the less contact they had with fathers and their whereabouts. However, they perceived mothers as poor sources of emotional support as they were not always willing to comfort them, but showed no interest in talking about the issue. This is not surprising taking into account that the provision of informational and emotional support generally go hand in hand (see also Wills, 1985). Children’s perceptions of the emotional support they received from mothers as inadequate have implications for their coping. This is particularly so because according to Bryant (1994) emotional support provided by parents helps



children develop cognitive and direct action problem-solving strategies that can facilitate children's attainment of autonomous strategies in the future.

Because mothers were not always good sources of emotional support, some children sought such support from peers and friends. Gender differences were noted in friends' ability to offer emotional support. These stemmed from most girls' reports that they sought emotional support from friends earlier during their experiences of divorce related stressors. Boys tended to confide in friends at a later time. The provision of emotional support facilitated adjustment because it showed some children that others shared their problems. This awareness on the part of the person seeking the support can decrease the perceived severity of the negative events.

*My friends helped me. I talked to them about my feelings. They helped me a lot because I realized that most of them lived in single parent families. It took me a long time before I told them about my parents' divorce. I kept the issue to myself for a long time and it made me sad. I could not talk to my mother about it because we did not get along well. After I told my friends, I felt better ... .... (Kabelo, boy aged 19)*

The above quotes show that children's and adolescents' knowledge that others also lived in single parent families helped them to cope. They perceived their disclosure to peers as helpful as it reinforced their beliefs that they were not the only ones whose parents were divorced and this made them feel better about themselves ( improved their self-esteem). Scholars such as Thoits (1986: 421) have noted that '...aid from others who have faced similar stressors and who have experienced similar reactions should be highly efficacious'. Taking into account the fact that 47 % of Botswana families in 1991 (Bhebhe and Mosha, 1996) were headed by single mothers, it is possible that if children of divorced parents can confide in others within a short period of time after their parents' divorce they can cope better with divorce.

Although the provision of emotional support to some children by friends was perceived as beneficial, as shown above, not all children reported that they confided in friends after divorce. Several children revealed that they only confided in friends before divorce regarding their pre-separation stressful experiences. According to these children, prior to the divorce, they had established stable and satisfying relationships with friends such that they felt comfortable seeking support from them regarding their problems. After divorce, because they changed neighbourhoods and schools, while others experienced a low standard of living, they did not feel inclined



to seek emotional support from their new friends. Some children reported that the lack of support from friends made adjustment / coping more difficult,

*.....I did not feel comfortable when I was with friends because I looked differently from them. Some of them tried to be friendly to me, but I just felt uncomfortable. I was not free to tell them things that worried me..... (Peter, aged 12)*

*I did not tell my friends that my parents had separated. I was new to the school and I did not have friends, and I feared that if I told some children, they will tell others.... (Aron, aged 13)*

These findings suggest that changes in the social networks of children following divorce increase divorce related stress and as such adversely affect the way children cope with divorce.

Most mothers were not aware of the role played by friends and peers in children's adjustment. Below are responses of some of the mothers.

*Maybe he told his friends, I don't know.*

*I am not aware of the role his peers played. He is the best person to know.*

*My children are very similar to me. They don't like to talk about these things because they make them sad. The divorce made me very sad. I have lost a lot. ....I. know the children are also very sad and they do not like to talk about it. So I don't think they told friends.*

Siblings were other sources of emotional support, especially to younger children. The finding that siblings provided support to each other should be understood in the context of their similar experiences within similar time frames (see also Wodarski, 1982).

However, not all siblings were important sources of emotional support. Their role as sources of emotional support to others was partly influenced by the different pre-separation relationships they had with their fathers. Generally, children who viewed their siblings as having received favourable treatment from their fathers were not keen to provide emotional support to others and those who were treated similar by fathers were willing to provide such kind of support to their younger siblings.

*I talked with my elder brother that I miss my father, but he said he does miss my father because he was not good to him. .... (Aron's sibling, boy aged 16)*



The ability of network members to provide support to each other can be hampered if they do not live near each other. Consequently, children who were separated from siblings following divorce reported that they were not able to provide and / or receive as much support from them as they would have if they were staying with them. Despite the fact that they were not staying together, one child viewed her sister as a source of emotional support for her as shown by the last sentence of the following exchange.

*Interviewer: You said you like to visit your sister every school holidays so that you can look after her child when she has gone to work. Is there anything else that you like about visiting your sister?*

*Thato, a girl aged 17): Yes, when I have visited her, she gives me money to buy things that I need.....I also talk to her about things that worry me and she consoles me.....*

Not only did children cope by receiving emotional support from mothers, peers and siblings, they also received it from maternal grandmothers. Children reported that grandmothers provided emotional and instrumental support, while mothers reported that grandmothers largely provided instrumental support to children. Mothers were not fully aware of the extent to which some grandmothers provided children with advice and emotional support, probably because the provision of such kind of support took place in their absence.

According to Wills, 1985, emotional support boosts self esteem. I would argue that it does so particularly when the receiver is also told good / positive things about himself / herself. Although about half of the children in this study reported sharing their feelings with somebody, only a few recalled being provided with positive feedback. These children associated the positive feedback, which their mothers used to give them with better coping.

*My father used to criticise me saying I am stupid at school....., and my mother has always told me that I am not. After my father left, I even performed better at school, and my mother became very happy and likes to tell me that I am going to be doctor. This made me feel good. I mean we no longer lived the kind of life we lived when dad was around, but because I was doing well in school and my mother was happy about it, I managed to continue performing well. Now like I told earlier, I am training to be a nurse..... (Antony, aged 19 whose relationship with his mother improved after his father stopped staying with them as there was no longer violence in the*

*home, Antony also viewed his relationship with his father both prior to divorce and father in negative terms)*

### Social companionship

Seeking social companionship or recreational support from both family and social network members was another way in which some children tried to cope with divorce and its related stressors. Some of the younger children who felt sad as a result of the changed relationships with their fathers reported that they coped by requesting their mothers to accompany them to see their fathers. However, their requests were sometimes unsuccessful.

*Daphne, girl aged 10 :...sometimes I ask my mother to go with me, but she says she cannot manage to go with me*

*Interviewer: And then what do you do when mum says she cannot go with you?*

*Daphne: Ah, nothing.*

The child's account was corroborated by her mother who also went on to explain her actions.

*.....you know when someone you thought loved you has hurt you so much like my ex-husband, you have difficulties when you see him because you begin to recall the pain he has caused to you. I really don't want to see him because he has hurt me a lot.....so even when the children ask me to go with them to see him, I don't want to.....*

Several mothers and children pointed out that prior to divorce, they spent more time with each other, while fathers assumed the role of disciplining children. Children appreciated the positive time they spent with their mothers and their mothers' roles as social companions. However, after divorce, a few children reported that mothers disciplined them more and this led them to cope by increasing the time they spent with friends. Mothers felt uncomfortable about the increased time children spent with friends and became more strict with children. According to mothers, by being strict, they were concerned about two main things. 1) That children were likely to learn deviant behaviours from friends as they spent more time with them. 2) That if people outside the home saw children misbehaving, they would blame the mother. However, children perceived their mothers' 'overly protective' behaviour and actions in negative terms, and instead spent little time with them and more with friends.



*I spend much time outside the home with friends because I don't like it when my mother insists that I should be in the home all the time.... (Catherine, aged 17, who had a close relationship with her father prior to the separation and whose experience of separation was about a year prior to the interview)*

*Interviewer: Does that help you?*

*Catherine: I don't know. It helps sometimes, but sometimes it doesn't because it makes my mother more angry at me....*

The above illustration leads one to raise the question 'when is parental support not conducive to children's coping'? A possible answer to this question can be drawn from Bryant (1994: 28) who wrote '....when the family unit surrounds the child with concern and when concern dominates parent-child interactions....to the exclusion of opportunities for autonomy in matters of concern'.

Not only did children cope by seeking social companionship from friends, some sought it from grandmothers and other relatives. Some grandmothers diverted children's attention from distress-producing situations by engaging children in activities such as stories, jokes, and games. Children generally appreciated their grand-mothers' roles as social companions. They reported that they liked to listen to stories from grandmothers, and believed this kept their minds preoccupied and they thought less about divorce related stressors.

### Spiritual support

Spiritual beliefs and the associated membership of a religious group offered support for a few adolescents. This method of coping was used by older boys and girls who lived in low income family backgrounds both before and after divorce and their experience of divorce was between 3 to 4 years prior to the interviews. Out of the four children in this study who said they used spiritual support as a way of coping, three said they were converted to Christianity after they experienced divorce and its related stressors. This shows that the process of coping can result in changes in the people's beliefs. The fourth child was already a strong believer in God prior to her parents' separation. All four children revealed how the religious beliefs they held helped them to cope with the stressors of divorce. Religion provided stability in the midst of stressful events to children. It also gave meaning and coherence to children's lives.

*.....the book of psalm chapter 27, verse 10 reads: When my father and mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up. This is one of the verses that gave me courage. The verse talks about a child who has lost both parents. I am lucky because I lost one parent, not two. My mother and God are still on my side. (Andrew, aged 18)*

Some children's network members who were members of their religious groups also provided them with social and spiritual support. Affiliation to religious groups helped children to believe that they were part of a continuing and caring social unit. This belief provided a sense of social integration and improved children's coping. This was evidenced by the words below of a 19-year-old adolescent who immediately after divorce stayed with her father and stepmother, but later stayed with her mother.

*.....One lady at church gave advice to me. She also told me that I should feel free to tell my problems to other church members so that they can pray for me. I felt better after I talked to her because I realised that although my step mother did not care about me, other people did..... (Kagiso, girl aged 21)*

All the four children who reported using spiritual support to cope with divorce related stressors viewed the method as helpful. Several previous investigators on coping with stressful situations / life events (cf. Wethington and Kessler, 1991; Folkman et al, 1986) have found that religion emerged as efficacious in alleviating stress.

### Support from formal network members

The foregoing discussion has focused on support children received from informal network members. Now attention will be on support / lack of support from formal network members<sup>13</sup>. Only one child said he sought help from a professional counsellor, but he perceived the counsellor's response as not helpful.

*....I told one of the counsellors whom I met while doing national service my problems and he told me that he will see me the following day. That was all: he never called me again. (Kabelo, boy aged 19)*

Almost all children and adolescents who participated in the study (except two) were attending school at the time of the interviews, so it is surprising that neither teachers

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<sup>13</sup> Formal network members are those that originate within the context of professional services.



nor school counselors were mentioned as sources of support. Given that trained school counsellors were employed by most schools which the children in the study attended, it seems important to discover why these individuals were not perceived as sources of guidance and support by the youngsters who could have used them.

School counsellors were not the only professionals that were under-utilised by children in this study, professionals such as social workers were also not used, despite adjustment problems that were reported by some children. Most children, however felt that they could have benefited from talking to professionals. They believed that professionals would have helped them to feel better and not to worry much about the stressful experiences they underwent because they are trained to do so. Some children also believed that professionals could have helped them and their mothers with advice on how to make their fathers support them financially, as well as tangible resources such as food and money particularly as their standard of living declined after divorce.

None of the children in this study confided in teachers despite the fact that they had daily contact with them. Children associated their reluctance to confide in teachers with their discomfort about talking to teachers because they viewed teachers as interested in academic, as well as their discomfort in talking to adults (especially who were not their relatives) about their family affairs. Some said as much as they did not feel free to talk to mothers about their divorce related concerns, they did not feel free to talk to teachers as either.

### ***Resilient children***

Despite the perceived stressors that children experienced, some reported that they coped well. In other words, they were resilient. The children pointed out that their academic, social as well as psychological lives were not affected. They developed coping skills to counteract stress and as such benefited from the stressful experiences. Accounts of resilient children in this study give us some clues about circumstances that facilitated their coping.

All children who believed they coped well were older adolescents. One possible explanation that accounts for this trend could be that they, unlike younger ones, are less dependent on their parents. But they are able to seek support not only from

family members, but also from their social network members. As Masten et al (1990) pointed out, older adolescents have the ability to seek protective relationships if others fail. Furthermore, children who reported coping well stayed in single parent families. Existing literature on children of divorce attests to the adjustment problems that children experience when their parents remarry immediately after the divorce (cf. Hetherington et al, 1989).

Resilient children perceived their relations with one or more of the following as close and supportive: peers, parents, an adult relative. They were also doing well in school. The finding that resilient children had a close relationship with one or more of the above people is not peculiar to the post-separation period, but was also found in children's accounts of their pre-separation experiences.

*.....Divorce has taught me to depend more on friends. I tell them what worries me and they give me suggestions..... (Lizzy, girl aged 16)*

Resilient children were also less likely to experience continued or additional adversity during the post-divorce period. For example they no longer witnessed parental violence, and although some experienced declines in their standards of living, they did not perceive the declines as severe, as they believed the discrepancies between their pre and post-separation economic circumstances were not too huge. Furthermore, resilient children seemed to be independent and mature. They were given greater responsibilities in the home than before divorce and this appeared to enhance their emotional, educational and social maturation, particularly as they took place in perceived supportive family environment. For example, they started to be sent to pay bills, took care of siblings and sick grandparents. Lastly, some of the children (four) who believed they coped well had strong religious beliefs. Prior to separation, only one of the four children associated her good coping with her strong religious beliefs.

It should be noted that the ability of some children to be resilient might have been affected by their pre-divorce rather than their post-divorce experiences. For example, several children mentioned that if it had not been for unhappy family lives (e.g. exposure to parental violence prior to divorce) they could have performed better in school. This line of thinking parallels findings of previous research (cf. Forehand et al, 1988) that parental conflict is more strongly related to children's adjustment than



is divorce per-se.

## **Summary**

The chapter has shown that divorce resulted in a wide range of changes in children's relationships with both family and social network members. It reflects the ambiguities and complexities of post divorce relationships. Respondents reported drastic declines in children's contact with fathers. They also associated the decline with lack of support from fathers.

The chapter also highlighted how relationships were shaped by factors such as parents' images about children's rights, divorce related economic and emotional distress that mothers experienced, passage of time, mothers' lack of ability to provide children with positive feedback, changes in neighbourhoods and schools, experiences of economic hardship, the nature of post-divorce contact between children and social network members such as grandmothers, boundaries, grandmothers' roles, changes in mothers' roles and lifestyles and communication.

One of the significant findings of this chapter is the drastic decline in contact children had with fathers after separation. This is striking because the declines were experienced by children irrespective of the nature of their pre-separation relationships with fathers. The chapter has also discussed perceptions of how children coped with changes in relationships with family and social network members.

One salient feature that characterised some mother-child relationships was that of control. Non-verbally and verbally, some mothers exerted control over their relationships with children. This control largely emanated from mothers' perceptions of children as having no right to seek certain information, to be provided with information on some divorce related issues, as well as to express their views, whereas children wanted such information and opportunities to air their views. Consequently, a considerable number of mothers thought all was well, but children were dissatisfied. Parents' inability to provide both informational and emotional support to children consequently affected their relationships with children as well as how they coped.

Children and adolescents' relationships with other social network members were also reported to have changed after divorce. For most children, their contact with paternal kin declined and some perceived this as a loss. Some children also experienced changes in their relationships with friends and peers and reported that this was one factor that made coping difficult for them.



## CHAPTER 10

### Summary and Implications

In this chapter, many of the threads that run through the discussion are pulled together to provide an overview of the key issues concerning children's experiences of divorce in Botswana. The chapter also discusses implications of the findings for theory, social policy, professional practice, and future research.

The rationale for this study is that a study of this nature has not been done in Botswana. As we saw in the literature review chapter, most work on children and divorce originates from developed countries and much of it has been quantitative. The study used a social constructionist approach to address the following questions:

- 1) What are the effects of separation and related processes on children?
- 2) What is the role of family and social network members in children's adjustment to divorce.
3. How and for what reasons were children's experiences of parental separation and divorce perceived differently by mothers and children themselves.

A qualitative approach was used in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a total of 60 people (25 mothers, 25 children and ten of their siblings). It was originally planned to interview children twice, but this plan was not accomplished because of practical constraints.

Two main overlapping theoretical approaches were used to guide the study. These are the social construction perspective and the sociology of childhood approach as my main interest was on processes and meanings. The study also drew upon social network theory, the feminist theory, the concept of resilience as well as some concepts of family stress theory.

#### ***The effects of separation and related processes on children***

This study has shown that divorce was an extended process, which entailed a series of social and environmental changes rather than a single event and had diverse effects on children. The study has also demonstrated that respondents' perceptions of the

effects of divorce and related processes on children were influenced by a multitude of factors. These include children's ages, gender, the prevalence of violence in the home during the pre and / or post- separation periods, the nature of children's relationships with both family and social network members prior to and after divorce, time since parental physical separation, children's pre and post-separation socio-economic backgrounds as well as whether children experienced multiple divorce-related stressors.

A majority of children in the study perceived the effects of the divorce process on them as mixed. In other words, positive experiences were often offset by negative ones. For instance, children who viewed their fathers' absence from the homes in positive terms because it meant the end of violence held negative perceptions about one or more of their other divorce related experiences such as inadequate communication about divorce and related processes, economic changes, changes in neighbourhoods and schools as well as changes in relationships with family and social network members.

The main event, which all children in the study experienced, was their fathers' absence. Respondents' accounts of the effects of this on children showed that the results were diverse. For example, one third of children reported that it did not affect them adversely, another third said father absence had adverse effects on them and the remaining third reported that the effects were mixed. Children who viewed father absence in negative terms were largely those who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as close. These children (except one) experienced drastic declines in their contact with fathers after separation. They associated their fathers' absence with feelings of anger, rejection, loss and sadness because they missed the social, emotional, recreational, educational and material support that their fathers used to provide them with. Others felt sad because they lost the familiar structure and a sense of stability and security that they used to derive from their families. The finding that father-child contact declined after divorce supports those of literature from other countries.

A third of the children in the study perceived father absence as both a stressor and a relief. They pointed out that they did not want their mothers to live unhappy lives (because of being beaten), while at the same time they wanted their fathers to



continue staying with them as they provided various kinds of support to them. The finding that several children believed there were gains and losses as a result of father absence shows that human reactions and situations involve a complex set of considerations. It also supports Walczak and Burns (1984)'s findings from a British study that some children hold mixed feelings towards their parents' divorce. However, more in that study than in this study held such feelings. One reason for this slight difference may be because of the high number of children in this study who lived in violent families. This implies that witnessing violence provokes strong feelings that shape children's perceptions of the effects of father absence on them.

Children who viewed father absence in positive terms fell into one or more of the following categories: older ones, had experienced parental physical separation more than two years prior to the interview, those who witnessed severe violence between parents for many years, those who were victims of parental violence as well as those who perceived their relationships with fathers prior to separation as poor. Some of the positive effects that children reported include improved relationships with mothers, improvements in their families' living standards, increased maturity and absence of violence in the home.

Sibling differences were noted in children's perceptions of father absence. Siblings who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as close reported intense feelings of sadness than their counterparts who did not perceive their relations with fathers as close.

The finding that most children witnessed parental violence prior to parental separation was a significant one in this study. This is so because a majority of children perceived witnessing parental violence as the major stressor, rather than parental separation, per-se. The study also found that children lived in violent homes for many years. This finding adds weight to those of previous studies in the country (cf. Mogwe, 1988; Molokomme, 1990), which show that violence against women is a common problem in Botswana and that women tend to stay in violent marriages for a long time. Previous studies on domestic violence in Botswana, however, have not explored perceptions of how children are affected by violence. This study makes a significant contribution to existing research because of its focus on children and mothers' perceptions of the effects of parental violence on them.



Evidence from international literature (cf. Rosen, 1979; Wolchik et al, 1985; Johnston et al, 1989; Cummings and Davies, 1994) as well as that from this study shows that parental conflicts and violence before, during and after separation are stressful to children. While both literature from Botswana – a developing country and that from developed countries such as Britain and America shows that some children witness parental violence prior to their parents' separation and that it is stressful to them, I argue that children in a developing country like Botswana are likely to be much more affected by their parents' violent actions because women tend to stay in violent marriages for a long time partly because of lack of services for them, customary laws that make divorce more difficult for women than for men, cultural expectations that require women to persevere in order to preserve their marriages and fear of stigma attached to divorce in Botswana. These factors make Botswana children live in violent families for a longer time compared to their counterparts in developed countries where attitudes towards divorce is more liberal and services are much more available.

From mothers' accounts, it became evident that they were not fully aware of the long-term consequences of violence on children. Children associated the violence with deep feelings of sadness, hostility, feelings of loss of childhood, fear and low self-esteem. Witnessing parental violence was perceived as a major source of stress which complicated children's adjustment not only because it created feelings listed above, but also because it affected them indirectly. For example, violence made some mothers distressed and adversely affected their parenting skills. Several mothers mentioned that they were not able to provide various kinds of social support to children because they were always worried about the animosity that was prevalent in their homes. The finding that most children in the study believed that parental violence was a major stressor supports findings of previous studies from other countries (see Rosen, 1979; Emery, 1982 for a review). After separation, three children in different families continued to witness parental violence, and one of them continued to be a victim. These figures show that parental separation led to a reduction in the number of children who were exposed to violence.

Five children perceived violence that was inflicted on them prior to their parents' separation as a major source of stress. The finding that some children in the study who witnessed parental violence were also victims supports those of existing



literature from Britain and America (cf. Rusell and Wyatt, 1986; Suh and Abel, 1990; Morley and Mullender, 1994 ) that show that men who physically abuse their wives are more likely to abuse their children too.

Similarly all the 17 children who experienced economic hardship pointed out that it had adverse effects on them. Some children experienced a low level of family income prior to separation as well as after, while others' experience of reduced resources began after their parents' physical separation. This shows that there was a link between children's pre and post-separation experiences. Children attributed this situation to the fact that their fathers were not taking care of them. The finding that children experienced economic hardship because absent fathers were no longer supporting them supports both national (cf. Griffith, 1984; WILSA, 1991; Alexander et al, 1992; Van-Driel, 1994) and international (cf. Wadsworth and Maclean, 1986; Nhlapo, 1990; Stewart et al, 1990; Duncan, 1994) literature on child support. Although literature from both developed countries and Botswana – a developing country such as Botswana attest to the economic hardship that children of divorce face, I argue that children in developing countries experience more severe hardship largely because their welfare programmes are less generous and exclude able bodied divorced mothers.

Findings of this study on how children themselves perceived their economic circumstances after separation are a significant contribution to national literature in that none of the previous studies on child support have focused on how children make sense of the economic circumstances. Previous studies in Botswana have focused on mothers and child support.

The nature of economic hardship for families in this study however varied according to children and mothers' perceptions of their families' pre and post-separation socio-economic backgrounds, children's perceptions of their relationships with fathers prior to separation as well as their views about the type of life their fathers and / or friends were living. Some children reported feelings of resentment, low self-esteem, sadness and betrayal. Some also believed that the low standard of living adversely affected their educational performance as well as their relationships with mothers and friends.

Parental violence and economic hardship were not the only experiences that children associated with adverse effects on them, lack of informational support, changes in relationships with family and social network members as well as changes in neighbourhoods and schools were also perceived as such. Children pointed out that lack of divorce communication made them confused and sad. They also reported that changes in schools and neighbourhoods adversely affected their relationships with peers and friends. Children's perceptions of how changes in relationships with family and social network members affected them were diverse. These will be highlighted on the section that focuses on the role of family and social network members in children's adjustment.

The finding that most parents did not adequately communicate with children about divorce and related changes supports those of some studies from Britain and America (cf. Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980; Walczak and Burns, 1984). However, the nature and extent of inadequate communication vary between children in Botswana and that of children in Britain and America. This is so because the Botswana cultures place a lot of emphasis on children's respect and obedience for elders (cf. Brown, 1977; Maundeni, 1999), while cultures of western countries emphasise independence (cf. Bronfenbrenner, 1970). Children in Botswana are rarely involved or consulted on important family matters concerning themselves. In this study, for example, most parents did not seek children's opinions on issues such as child custody and contact with their non-custodial parents. Furthermore, most children did not feel free to ask their parents about divorce related experiences. These dynamics partly resulted in children concealing their feelings, frustrations and opinions.

### ***The role of family and social network members in children's adjustment to divorce***

The second question that the study aimed to address was 'what is the role of family and social network members in children's adjustment to the divorce process?'. The study found that both family and network members played various roles including both supportive and non-supportive. Only six children reported that they were satisfied about their mothers' role in providing them with information about what was happening and its implications for them. They believed such information facilitated their adjustment to the divorce process.



Most children in the study perceived mothers as poor sources of information regarding divorce and related experiences. They reported that their opinions about issues such as custody and contact with fathers were not sought, that their questions were not adequately answered and that the explanations their mothers gave them were inadequate and brief. Children believed that the poor communication between them and their mothers about divorce was one of the factors that made their adjustment to divorce difficult, especially during the time immediately following parental physical separation. Because informational and emotional support often go hand in hand, a majority of children also reported that their mothers did not play a positive role in providing them with emotional support. On a positive note, children generally reported that mothers facilitated their adjustment to some extent by providing them with material support.

A majority of children in the study reported that fathers played a negative role in their adjustment to the divorce process. For some children, their fathers' roles as sources of stress to them started during the pre-separation period and continued to the post-separation period. Prior to separation, for example, most children said fathers made life miserable for them because of their violent behaviours towards their mothers. And five said fathers' violent actions on both them and their mothers adversely affected their lives.

Several children who had close relationships with fathers during the pre-separation period reported that fathers made their adjustment to the divorce process difficult because they stopped financially supporting them and also broke contact with them. These children missed the various kinds of support that they used to receive from fathers. They reported feelings of sadness even a few years after their parents' physical separation. Their counterparts (the majority) who perceived their pre-separation relationships with fathers as either mixed or poor largely missed the material support from fathers. They linked the absence of material support with difficulties in adjustment, however their accounts indicated that the adjustment difficulties were not as intense and long lasting as those for children who perceived their pre-separation relations with fathers as close.

Most children reported that siblings facilitated their adjustment to parental separation. They did this by providing one or more of the following types of support:

informational, emotional, companionship and material support. Only a few children said siblings hindered their adjustment because of their failure to provide them with emotional support. Children in the first group were those who believed they were treated equally by one or both parents prior to the separation. And those who believed siblings were not supportive were those who received favourable treatment from their fathers prior to the separation.

Several children in the study reported that friends and peers played a positive role in their adjustment to the divorce process. These children pointed out that friends provided recreational, companionship emotional as well as informational support. These were children who continued contact with friends in their previous schools and neighbourhoods as well as those who were able to establish relationships with friends in the new neighbourhoods and schools within a relatively short period of time. They shared their divorce-related concerns with friends and believed that this facilitated their adjustment because friends provided emotional and informational support. Some children said friends' role in their adjustment was minimal because following separation, they changed neighbourhoods and schools and therefore lost contact with old friends. Other factors that hampered the ability of friends to play a significant role in children's adjustment to the divorce process are mothers' attitudes, economic hardship and experiences of violence in the home.

Relatives were other network members who played a role in children's adjustment. Most children said maternal grandmothers were good sources of informational, companionship and emotional support. Other maternal relatives provided instrumental support. Paternal relatives played a minimal role in children's adjustment. More mothers than children in the study perceived relatives as sources of stress and associated this with children's difficulties in adjusting to divorce. For example, several mothers pointed out that some of their relatives expected and asked for increased material support from them after realising that they were no longer married. Such relatives believed that the absence of children's fathers meant that mothers had more money at their disposal as they no longer shared their incomes with their husbands.



The study found that children's formal network members played a minimal role in their adjustment to the divorce process. This is striking taking into account that many children said they perceived one or more of divorce-related experiences as stressful.

### ***How and for what reasons were children's experiences of parental separation and divorce perceived differently?***

The last question that the study sought to explore was 'how and for what reasons were children's experiences of divorce experienced differently'? The study found that respondents' reports of children's experiences sometimes contradicted each other. For example on issues such as the provision of informational and emotional support to children, lack of positive feedback and its effects on children as well as how father absence and some other stressful divorce circumstances affected children.

Most mothers did not believe children lacked informational support. A closer analysis of mothers' accounts showed that cultural beliefs played a key role in their constructions of childhood (e.g. children's capabilities, needs and rights) as well as their ability to communicate with children. Three groups of beliefs influenced mothers' ability to communicate with children. These are beliefs in open communication (six) beliefs in temporary concealment (15) and beliefs in permanent concealment (four). Those who believed in temporary concealment (the majority) were of the opinion that communication about separation should only take place when children are old enough to understand. They perceived children as: 1) passive; 2) vulnerable; 3) evolving beings who were in the process of growing up, and therefore not capable of understanding / and or coping with the explanations. Therefore, they did not adequately communicate with them or seek their opinions. The above images are based on a developmental belief.

Other mothers pointed out that they believed in permanent concealment and that divorce communication should never take place between them and their children. Such mothers' images were absolute and based on inter-generational belief. These mothers believed that children's material needs were more important than social and psychological needs. They also had a tendency to project their own feelings about divorce to children. For example, they felt that because they wanted children's fathers to stop staying with them as they were violent, children also held such feelings. Their failure to adequately meet children's informational and emotional needs created



frustrations among children and led some to conceal their feelings. For several children, the interview for this study was the first time that they had aired their feelings to an adult and a few cried as they did so. The degree to which children concealed their feelings was striking and has implications for both future research and interventions as will be shown later in the chapter.

Communication between children and mothers was not only influenced by mothers' beliefs and images about childhood, it was also influenced by images children held of adults, especially parents. For example, some children viewed parents as powerful and therefore did not ask them certain questions or reveal their emotions, fearing that their actions would be interpreted as lack of respect. As such they kept quiet. Because mothers expected children to act passively and not reveal their feelings, they interpreted children's quietness as a sign of good coping, whereas most children had internalised their feelings. These dynamics show how socialisation can produce beliefs that influence people's experiences as well as how they cope.

Contradictions were also noted in children's and mothers' accounts of children's feelings and the adequacy of emotional support they received from both family and social network members. While most children pointed out that they lacked emotional support and this made adjustment difficult for them, most mothers did not hold that perception. Because of the absence of open communication between a majority of children and mothers, most mothers were not fully aware of how divorce and related situations affected children's feelings. They were also largely unaware of how children felt about changes in relationships with both family and social network members. In fact some mothers tended to minimise the changes that took place and their perceived effects on children.

Lastly discrepancies were noted in children and mothers' accounts of contact with fathers. Some mothers in the study neither discouraged nor encouraged children to maintain contact with their fathers. The neutral behaviour made children uncertain as to whether and when it was appropriate to request permission to visit fathers. They interpreted their mothers' neutral behaviour as a sign to discourage them from initiating discussions on contact with fathers. Mothers on the other hand, did not view it as such, they reported that they just did not want to talk about children's fathers partly because they have hurt them by either leaving them or being violent to



them in the past.

### ***Significant themes from the Study***

Despite the diversity of children's experiences, several significant themes were drawn from respondents' accounts. These are children as active agents, adults' blindness to children's needs, coping and resilience.

#### **Children as active agents**

It has been demonstrated in this thesis that children were not passive in the process of their parents' divorce, but were active agents seeking to influence their experiences. They made pro-active efforts to deal with divorce-related stressors. They did not see themselves as passive victims of parental divorce, but as instrumental agents capable of taking action to deal with it.

However, they did not always succeed because of their lack of power and low status in relation to that of adults. Children's role as active agents was shown by their actions and behaviours starting from the period prior to their parents' physical separation, during and after. Prior to the physical separation, for example, a few children intervened to try to stop their fathers from beating their mothers. Some children also tried to convince their mothers to leave the marital homes because of the violence, however in most cases, this request was met by resistance on the part of mothers. In other words, children's efforts were not always successful.

As time went on, when some children realised the changes ( for example, father absence from the homes, changes in neighborhoods), they took proactive steps such as seeking information from their mothers about the changes. Although several mothers provided some information to children, some children were not satisfied with it, and persistently questioned their mothers for more information. This step for some children, was met with anger on the part of mothers. This shows that although children see themselves as active agents and capable of taking measures to change their circumstances, their efforts can be hampered by those of family members, especially adults.

A few children also acted as active agents in their parents' separation by protecting

their mothers from getting depressed. This was done in several ways. These are: children crying in private when they felt sad because of their fathers' absence so that mothers did not realise; being reluctant to raise certain questions; and providing emotional support to their mothers. One child took a more confrontational approach and asked his father who apparently was seeing him every day of the week to come back to the home and stay with them. All these actions by children refute commonly held beliefs by adults that children are passive and incompetent.

### Adults' blindness to children's needs

This study has found that children's views were neglected by parents. This is shown by children's accounts (largely discussed in chapter six) that indicate that their views on issues of custody and contact with fathers were not sought. Children's views were not only neglected by parents, but by formal agencies as well. Only one child's views on custody were sought by the courts. The courts awarded custody to mothers partly because fathers did not object to the mothers' request to have custody. The finding that a social welfare report was only asked for in one case out of a total of 35 shows that children's rights are subsumed within parental rights and obligations. Perhaps this reflects the cultural assumption / norm that children should be seen but not heard. Findings that adults (both parents and professionals) generally did not seek children's opinions and consequently were not aware of children's needs shows that there is a mountain to climb in terms of public understanding of children's needs and rights.

### Coping mechanisms

Almost all children took steps to cope with the divorce-related stressors they experienced both prior to and after their parents' physical separation, but not all of them perceived the coping strategies they used as effective. Methods which were viewed as effective are positive thinking, using spiritual support, seeking social support from some social network members, as well as reconstructing one's life positively. Strategies children perceived as ineffective included concealment of feelings (which a considerable number of them used), self-destructive coping, wishful thinking and seeking informational support, especially from mothers. One reason why children perceived some of their coping methods as unsuccessful is that they had little power. As such they knew from previous experience that even if they



sought help, adults would either not respond or respond in ways which would not be satisfactory to them.

Several children were of the opinion that they had difficulties in adjusting to divorce and its stressors. These were children who experienced multiple divorce-related stressors. The most common factors that children associated with difficulties in coping are: witnessing severe and frequent violence between parents prior to divorce; being victims of violence; beliefs that they experienced severe economic hardship because of lack of paternal financial support; lack of informational support; and concealment of feelings largely because they were not comfortable to share their feelings with their mothers (who were their custodial parents). Other factors that children associated with difficulties in coping were: negative perceptions of father absence, beliefs that custodial mothers caused the divorce; perceptions of negative relations with some family members such as mothers and stepfathers, as well as doing badly at school.

### Resilient children

Several older boys and girls reported that despite the divorce related stressful experiences they went through, they coped well. By coping well, children meant that they were doing satisfactorily at school, were having good relationships with friends and other people, maintained a good attitude towards life and also worried less about divorce and related experiences. From children's accounts, the following circumstances appeared to facilitate resilience: passage of time, perceived close relationships with an adult after separation, satisfaction about communication regarding divorce and related issues, beliefs that one had acquired strengths or benefited as a result of divorce, positive perceptions of father absence, beliefs that one is good in school / and or other activities, the absence of conflict and violence in the home after divorce, perceived absence of no changes or improvements in families' material circumstances as well as seeking of and receipt of social support from family and social network members.

From the above listed circumstances that appeared to facilitate resiliency for some children in this study, it is reasonable to conclude that: if children perceive their post-divorce relationships with one or both parents in positive terms; if they are satisfied about divorce communication; if they believe they benefited as a result of divorce; if

their exposure to parental violence does not continue after separation; if they experience little, no changes or improvements of their families' material circumstances following separation and if they seek and receive social support from family and social network members, they can cope well with the divorce process and vice-versa.

### ***Theoretical contribution and considerations***

This study has used several theoretical perspectives to illuminate children's experiences of divorce. These are the social construction approach, the sociology of childhood approach, the feminist perspective, as well as some concepts of social network theory, family stress theory and the concept of resiliency. Combining the above theoretical frameworks proved useful to this study because each one of them addressed different issues, although some of them overlap. In the rest of this section, I outline how the study findings supported or refuted some of the assumptions of the theories I used.

The finding that children and mothers' perceptions occasionally varied supports the social construction approach's premise that people's perceptions of reality are not always identical. Differences in sibling accounts that were found in this study also supports the above premise. Respondents' perceptions also differed by their personal histories and the meanings they ascribed to children's experiences.

Most of the premises of the sociology of childhood approach were supported by findings of this study. For example, this study has shown how experiences of children in Botswana – a developing country vary from those in other developing countries of Africa as well as with those in developed countries. Proponents of the sociology of childhood approach rightly point out that the experiences of childhood vary according to variables such as gender, class or ethnicity. This study further found that children's experiences of childhood also vary among siblings. This is my contribution to the sociology of childhood approach.

The sociology of childhood approach's emphasis on children as active and creative in promoting their own knowledge, development and social positioning, rather than passive agents, was also found to be highly relevant for this study. For example,



some children took steps to try to stop their parents from fighting, others tried to persuade their fathers to come to stay with them, others confided in and sought explanations from their family as well as from their social network members. All these actions refute commonly held beliefs that children are passive.

One of the premises of the sociology of childhood paradigm is that children as a social group have low status, power and resources in society. This was found to be true in this study. This study further found that children's low status and power created adjustment problems for most of them. Children's inferior position was evidenced in several ways: 1) Most revealed that they were not consulted in family decisions, that their opinions were not sought and they felt sad about this; 2) Some children feared to disobey parents by expressing their feelings, asking certain questions, as well as seeking help outside the family and as such kept feelings and concerns to themselves; 3) Some children felt parents were free and had the power to talk to them angrily, but they (children) did not have the corresponding means at their disposal. Although children all over the world have low status, power and resources than adults, there are differences among societies. Children in developing countries, for example, have less resources than their counterparts in developed countries. These differences create variations in children's experiences as well as their perceptions of stressful life events on them.

Another concept of the sociology of childhood paradigm that was helpful to this study is that children have competencies. This is related to the social network theory concept of reciprocity as well as to the family stress theory concept of resources. Some children were able to offer emotional support to their depressed mothers and siblings, while others helped with household chores.

Using the feminist approach in this study has helped in two major ways. First, it helped to identify gender differences in children's experiences. Second, it enabled me to show more explicitly how gender inequalities that exists in society at large affect (both directly and indirectly) children's experiences of divorce as well as its effects on them. The feminist approach acknowledges that women and children are victims of a patriarchal society, but overlooks the fact that they are not victims at the same level. Women have more resources than children, they also have power and control over children. For example, some mothers made it difficult for children to maintain



contact with their fathers.

The use of the feminist approach in this study adds a different dimension to the sociology of childhood approach, which only focuses on children's issues. This study has confirmed the feminist theory's premise that children and mothers' experiences are related. It has shown that women's subordinate position and lack of power and resources affect children both directly and indirectly. For instance, some women's engagement in hectic and low paying jobs following separation, their experience of violence, as well as economic hardship adversely affected children. The sociology of childhood approach can therefore better address the nature of children's experiences of divorce as well as its effects on them in a developing country such as Botswana by making reference to the close link that exists between children and mothers' experiences.

Social network concepts such as durability and function were helpful to the study. As mentioned elsewhere in the chapter, changes of schools and neighbourhoods as well as the departure of fathers from homes affected the stability of some children's social network links, as well as the support children received. Children associated this with adjustment difficulties.

Using some concepts from family stress theory such as stress, support and coping was also relevant as it showed how children's adjustment is partly affected by their appraisal of events as they unfold as well as personal, familial and extrafamilial resources. Although each of the components of the stress model varies among individual children, several themes and patterns emerged that were common to most. First, all children perceived one or more of the divorce related experiences as negative or stressful. Second, children tend to utilise existing informal support systems and resources. Like Hamon and Cobb's findings (1993), almost all children in the study called upon informal sources of support. Lastly, the research evidence suggests that children can cope and adapt relatively well to the process of divorce provided they are not faced with multiple stresses and continued adversity (see also Hetherington, 1984: 21).

Some researchers (e.g. Garbarino et al, 1978) who have used social network theory have also used social network maps on which participants mapped their social



network members, sometimes by name to facilitate the recall of as many network members as possible. This approach was tried in this study, but was not welcomed by respondents who participated in the pilot interviews because they felt uncomfortable about people's names. This was so despite the fact that they were assured of confidentiality. Furthermore, they viewed the approach as more appropriate to younger children who might not easily recall their network members. They believed that they could simply provide me with the information I wanted without having to list their network members by name on paper. The abandonment of the use of social network maps as a result of respondents' lack of interest in it shows that the interviewer was responsive to respondents' needs and rights. It also shows the value of the pilot study. However, it seems as if not having used social network maps did not affect the quality of data collected. If that approach was adopted, it could have been time-consuming and probably shifted the focus of the interviews, as respondents would have been too immersed in trying to recall and write down all their social network members. Social network maps I believe would be more relevant in a quantitative study than a qualitative one.

### ***Strengths and limitations of the study***

There are several strengths and limitations of the present study which have implications for future research. First, the study has explored an issue, which has not been explored before in the country. Therefore it has made an original contribution to knowledge. Second, the dual perspective nature of the study is a strength. Because interviews were conducted with children and mothers, this yielded insights into different, sometimes complementary and occasionally conflicting, perspectives. In addition, the inclusion of siblings is a strength as it adds a new dimension to existing literature. This is so particularly that most studies excluded siblings' perspectives, but focused on the experiences of only one child in a family. Third, the study covered a lengthy period retrospectively. In other words, it was not concerned with children's experiences at a single point in time. This allowed respondents to reflect on the processes that had taken place over a period of time. Fourth, the use of various theories is a strength as it illuminated perceptions of the nature of children's experiences, their effects on children as well as the role of family and social network members in children's adjustment more adequately.



Lastly, the qualitative nature of the study is a strength because of several reasons: 1) it allowed the voices of various children (ages, gender, socio-economic backgrounds, those who have experienced parental violence and those who have not, those who had close relations with fathers and those who did not, etc) to be heard: 2) it revealed how the meanings that respondents attached to children's experiences shaped their perceptions of the effects of divorce on children as well as how such meanings changed over time; 3) it has allowed respondents to detail out in their own words their diverse views of children's experiences. By so doing interactions among the different dimensions of children's lives became much more evident. Lastly, the study has made a significant contribution to the few qualitative studies that have been done on children and divorce. Most studies are quantitative.

One of the limitations of this study is that its findings cannot be generalised to the whole population of children of divorced parents who live in maternal custody families in Botswana because: 1) the sample size was small. A larger sample would be necessary to establish generalisability of the results. 2) Participants in this study were largely drawn from an urban area. 3) The study largely focused on older children. Research from developed countries has shown that children of different ages experience divorce differently. As such it is crucial that future research should include both younger and older children. Secondly, the cross-sectional nature of this study is another limitation. Future research on this topic should be oriented towards longitudinal studies that could examine post-divorce adjustment as well as track developmental changes over a period.

### ***Implications for policy and practice***

#### **Improving children's material circumstances**

Findings of this study have shown that a considerable number of children and mothers associated divorce with a low standard of living. Children suffer when their fathers stop supporting them. Respondents' accounts of the social, psychological, educational, as well as health problems children experienced due to lack of paternal financial support evidenced this.

Almost all mothers lamented that the child support payments ordered were inadequate to meet children's needs. They also blamed the child support system for



its failure to make fathers pay. However, several of them reported that they had never filed child support complaints. They associated their reluctance to file such complaints with one or more of the following reasons: low payments, lack of knowledge about procedures to file child support complaints, fear of violence as well as fear of witchcraft. It is therefore crucial that women are enlightened about the procedures involved in child support. In addition, child support payments should be increased so that they are more responsive to children's needs. One way of doing this is to create a formula based system like the one used in some developed countries (cf. Davis et al, 1998) that takes into account fathers' salaries and children's needs.

Accounts of some mothers and children who participated in this study showed that gender and power inequalities in society contributed to some extent to children's economic problems associated with divorce. For most families, fathers were earning larger amounts of money, and this meant that when paternal financial support stopped, children automatically experienced economic hardships. The hardship was exacerbated by the fact that division of property did not necessarily improve the lives of children following divorce. This is especially true because the law does not define the intangible assets such as career assets, education, job training, pension and insurance that couples have acquired in the course of their marriages. Because in some marriages, the husband builds his career and earning capacity during the period of the marriage, while the wife stays at home taking care of children, this is one of the major causes of the economic disaster divorced women and their children experience. It is therefore imperative that intangible assets couples acquired in the course of their marriages should be seriously taken into account when property is divided.

Although gender discrepancies exist among men and women in Botswana as evidenced by the information provided in chapter one, which showed that more men than women have attained higher education and work in higher paying jobs, recently some female advocacy groups and voluntary organisations have started to enlighten women about their rights to, for example, education that can improve their standard of living in the long run. However, there is tension between modern thinking about women's rights and traditional ways. Some people (including women, especially those who live in rural areas and who have less education ) tend to resist modern thinking about women's rights. They prefer to adhere to the status quo of respecting



culture, rather than women's rights.

### Addressing domestic violence and its impact on children

Besides economic hardships, one other experience that children went through which has implications for policy and practice is domestic violence. According to feminists, domestic violence is caused by men's control and power they have over women. Therefore focus needs to be placed on changing societal attitudes and practices of patriarchy if violence against women is to be eliminated. Values of respect for women's rights and egalitarian relations need to be instilled in people. This cannot take place overnight, but it needs time. In the process of outlining steps that could be taken to address the problem, I shall also briefly highlight some of the factors that influenced women to stay in violent relationships because an understanding of such factors is crucial as we try to find measures for dealing with the problem.

Most women said they stayed in violent relationships because they feared economic and housing hardships for both themselves and their children. This fear is understandable taking into account the following factors: 1) Most women in the study were earning lower salaries than their husbands. This trend partly emanated from the fact that generally women in Botswana are less educated than men. 2) Marriage laws that give men powers to control valuable property such as cattle, houses and land. Taking into account the above factors, the following recommendations are made. a) Policies that allow a victim of violence to occupy the residence in which she lives while the abusive partner stays away but continues to pay the rent where necessary and to help support the children should be formulated. This was one of the proposals of the draft bill that was presented in Parliament in June, 1999. b) Gender neutral laws should be formulated and existing ones that discriminate against women should be abolished. This move however is a long term one especially as there are relatively few women who hold positions of power in Botswana and therefore their ability to influence policy is limited. For example, prior to the 1999 elections, there were only four women in parliament compared to 29 men. Now the number has increased to eight. As the number of women who hold positions of power increases, it is hoped that policies that better meet the needs of women and children will be formulated. It would also help if more emphasis was placed on women's education because this may increase women's chances of being able to survive economically on their own, rather than to depend on men. This measure should be the responsibility of individual



women and girls, their parents and families and society at large.

Almost all women who left their spouses because of violence moved from the marital homes. These moves created instability in some children's social networks, as they not only changed neighbourhoods, but changed schools as well. Changes in schools and neighbourhoods made them lose contact with friends whom they could confide in and they perceived this as having had adverse effects on their adjustment. Consequently, policies, which allow children to continue staying in familiar environments, might facilitate children's adjustment.

Some mothers pointed out that the lack of places of safety made them stay in violent relationships for many years. Only one shelter for abused women currently exists in Botswana and it is in the capital city. Therefore most women in the country do not have access to it. It is important that more safe places are established throughout the country so that they can provide women and children with safe housing, support and advice. One obstacle to this recommendation, however, is lack of funds. Donors, not the government, for example, fund the current shelter. Financial insecurity for abused women's shelters is not only peculiar to Botswana, shelters in Britain as well as those in some developing countries also face the problem (cf. Lupton, 1994, Letsie, 1998). One way through which voluntary organisations and shelters in Britain have tried to deal with this problem is by seeking funding from the government. Some observers, however, contend that this approach has its costs. For example, Brenton, 1985; and Lupton, 1994, noted that funding from government resulted in government having greater political control over the activities of voluntary organisations. Lupton asserts that the organisations had to comply with the terms and conditions of government grants, and this "involved a redefinition of the service" (p. 63). Government is usually more interested in the organisations achieving measurable goals, rather than goals that were difficult to measure (but which were the organisations' focus) like 'enabling women to achieve self-determination and greater confidence'. These observations of how funding sources affected the goals of shelters in Britain have implications for voluntary organisations in Botswana. Although the Botswana economy is doing well and the government can afford to sponsor domestic violence projects, it may be advisable for organisations to seek funding elsewhere in order to avoid the possibility of government having control over these organisations.



In addition to increasing the number of shelters countrywide, it is important that women should be encouraged to use such facilities. Various ways can be used to encourage women to use these services. For example, radio talks, newspapers and televisions could be used for women in towns. Because women in rural and remote areas (especially those who are poor and uneducated) may not have access to these forums, one way through which they could be reached is by family welfare educators, nurses and social workers.

Furthermore, there is a need for women to be informed about their rights in relation to domestic violence. Women's advocacy organisations in Botswana have recently started to hold workshops educating women about their rights, as well as raising the public's awareness about domestic violence. However, their efforts are constrained by lack of funds.

Several women said they stayed because of poor / unsupportive responses from formal social network members such as customary courts officers and the police. An issue related to unsupportive responses of customary court workers is that of customary laws that make divorce more difficult for women than for men (see chapter one for a detailed discussion of this issue). The formulation of gender neutral laws is therefore extremely important as it could go a long way in reducing the number of women who stay in violent marriages for many years.

Women's reports that their formal network members' poor responses made them to stay in violent relationships imply that the officers should be sensitised to the needs of battered women. Efforts along this line of thinking are already in place, however they need to be intensified. For example, in 1997, due to the petitioning of the police by women's groups on the unsatisfactory way in which they handled domestic violence cases in the country, the commissioner of police set up a task force to investigate police responses to domestic violence cases. The task force made some recommendations regarding how the police could improve the way they handled such cases. The improvements are outlined in the 'Task force report (1997): Police Responses to Cases of Domestic Violence'. According to one top police officer, the recommendations have been communicated to all police officers in the country and 'they send a clear message that domestic violence should not be tolerated at all' (Kapinga, 1999). Whether the recommendations will be fully implemented remains



to be seen. Formulating some guidelines / plans is one step and implementing them is another. It is therefore crucial that an independent body be set up to monitor the police's implementation of the guidelines. This body could be composed of women who had experienced violence, some police officers as well as some social service workers.

Women's accounts showed that not only did they receive unsupportive responses from formal network members, but they also received them from informal network members. The women associated the poor responses with cultural beliefs that men had the right to chastise them, which their informal network members held. There is a great need to educate the public at large about the effects of domestic violence on children and women. This education could be done through schools, newspapers, radio programmes as well as TV programmes. It should not be a one-off event, but should be a regular exercise as people's attitudes and beliefs cannot be changed overnight.

Furthermore, programmes that teach men to solve their relationship problems through non-violent ways must be started. Such programmes exist in many western countries, such as America and the U.K. CHANGE and the Lothian Domestic Violence Probation Project (LDVPP) are some examples of such programmes that exist in the U.K. These projects use 'an educational rather than a therapeutic approach, and primarily work with men in groups' (Dobash et al, 1996: 12). Projects such as the above could be adopted in Botswana with modifications taking into account cultural, economic, political and social factors of the country. Because it may be difficult for men to feel comfortable about participating in groups from the outset, (particularly as violence is a sensitive issue and also that the notion of group work is relatively new in Botswana) individual work with men could precede group work. There are no workers who are trained in the skills to work with violent men in Botswana, therefore, it would be crucial for agencies to either send people abroad to acquire such knowledge and skills or sponsor people who have expertise in the area to come to Botswana to provide the relevant training.

### Improving relations between children and parents

This study has found that half of the children, including some who did not particularly get on well with fathers, reported that they preferred frequent contact



with fathers. This suggests that the encouragement of this type of contact, where possible, would go a long way towards reducing frustrations in children of divorced parents. It may also encourage fathers to support their children particularly that studies from other countries (e.g. Seltzer, 1991) have found a relationship between child-father contact and child support. The encouragement could be done through mediation services which parents could be ordered to attend by the courts both before and after the legal divorce. However caution should be taken in encouraging men who are / were violent to women and children to have contact with children as this can give them the opportunity to abuse children. In other words, contact should not take precedence over child welfare. Lessons from studies conducted in places such as England, which show that child contact gives fathers the opportunity to continue to abuse women and children (cf. Hester, Radford and colleagues, 1996) should guide decisions about child-father contact in cases where there was a history of violence in families in Botswana.

Children's accounts of dissatisfaction with the informational support that their parents (especially mothers) provided to them is another area that has implications for practice. The study has shown that most children believed that parents did not adequately communicate with children about divorce and related changes. Children who were satisfied with the way their parents communicated with them as well as the content of the communication were more likely to say that they coped well than their counterparts who were not satisfied with the communication. It is therefore vital that professionals who come into contact with divorced parents should enlighten them about the importance of communicating openly with children. In order for this to take place, however, professionals themselves need to be made aware of the importance of parent-child communication about divorce. This enlightenment could be made through seminars conducted by child welfare experts for professionals who come in contact with divorced parents, such as lawyers, social workers, teachers and school counsellors. It should however be recognised that this enlightenment on parents may not bring positive results within a short period of time taking into account prevailing cultural beliefs about parent-child relationships. As mentioned elsewhere in the thesis, the Botswana culture puts a lot of emphasis on children's respect for adults and this may affect parents' perceptions of the information professionals deliver to them about parent-child communication.



## Mediation services

Mediation services<sup>14</sup> could have several advantages for both parents and children. For example, they could help parents to be aware of how divorce related situations such as conflict between them, poor parenting and a low family living standard contribute to children's adjustment difficulties. This awareness is essential taking into account that most mothers in the study were not aware of how their children were affected by divorce. Such services could also go a long way in helping parents to be aware of their own feelings about divorce as well as how the feelings impact on their ability to be responsive to children's needs (Haynes, 1978). In such a way, parents could be more supportive to children.

Mediation services would also enable children to air their views on issues such as contact with fathers and custody. Involving children in the decision-making process is based 'on the belief that they also should be empowered to control their own lives' (Hayes, 1981: 29). This study has shown that some children lacked understanding about their parents' divorce, therefore engaging them in the mediation process can increase their understanding of the divorce and consequently facilitate their adjustment (see also Haynes, 1981).

Existing services and systems that deal with parental separation are by and large not sensitive to children's needs. As noted earlier in this chapter, professionals do not seek children's views on custody except when parents disagree on custody and the courts order social workers to compile a report. The scarcity of contact between children and professionals can make it difficult for children who need counselling to be identified. Mediation services can enable conciliators to identify such children, as well as to refer them to counselling services (provided children themselves as well as their parents give their consent). Counselling can go a long way in alleviating children's negative feelings and misconceptions about divorce.

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<sup>14</sup> The Policy and Standards Committee of the UK College of Family Mediators as cited in Robinson (1999: 131), mediation is a process in which an impartial third person, the mediator, assists those involved in family breakdown, and in particular separating or divorcing couples, to communicate better with one another and to reach their own agreed and informed decisions about some or all of the issues relating to, or arising from the separation, divorce, children, finance or property.

Introducing a new programme such as mediation may not be smooth because some parents may not allow their children to participate, particularly

- when they have strong cultural beliefs that ‘ children should be seen but not heard’
- when they hold images of children as incompetent and not capable of understanding and / or airing their views

Professionals who have frequent contact with divorcing families such as lawyers should therefore make parents aware of the benefits of mediation for children. In order for this to take place, lawyers themselves should be enlightened about it. This enlightenment could be done through their training. Lastly, because establishing a new programme is costly, professionals such as social workers, who already have experience in working with families, could staff the conciliation services. Given more training, specifically on mediation, they would be able to provide services to divorcing families.

### Written information

This study has shown that most children lacked adequate support from both family and social network members. It has also revealed that very few children had contact with professionals and many wished that they could have had such contact, as it would have helped them to cope. As such, there is great need for booklets and leaflets that are written in Setswana to help children understand and cope with parental divorce. Because some children may not be able to find the books for themselves, adults (both lay and professionals) should be encouraged to inform children about their existence. Currently, only a few exist, but they are written in English and are more relevant to the countries of the authors. None is written in Setswana. Furthermore, introducing subjects such as personal and social education can go a long way in informing children about their rights.

Several mothers said they lacked information about procedures to follow when filing child support complaints as well as how the whole divorce system works. Some leaflets explaining divorce related matters such as access, custody, maintenance and other issues that can increase parents’ understanding of the system as well as enlighten them about how to ease their children’s adjustment to divorce could be formulated by a team of multidisciplinary professionals. These could be distributed to



all professionals who have contact with divorcing people, especially lawyers. Taking into account that some parents are illiterate, professionals working with divorced families should explain the contents of the leaflets to the people.

### ***Implications for the education of professionals working with divorced families***

The finding that domestic violence was perceived as a major stressor by most children has implications for professional education. It is recommended that domestic violence must become an integral part of training for all professionals who come into contact with abused women emphasising the effects of violence on children. Because children revealed that they felt better after realising that others also came from single parent families, it is also recommended that the education curriculum should include family issues such as divorce emphasising that it is acceptable for children to come from divorced families. Education for professionals about the effects of poverty on children is also vital, taking into account that most children said they experienced economic hardships as a result of their parents' divorce.

Most children perceived the ways they coped as unhelpful, it is therefore vital that they are encouraged to use more effective ways of coping such as positive thinking, sharing their feelings with other people who are not necessarily family members, constructing their lives positively as well as spiritual support. Use of unhelpful methods such as concealment and self-destructive coping should be discouraged. This information could be disseminated to children by teachers particularly as they have frequent contact with children. They are in a unique position to provide information and advice to children and also to observe any changes in behaviour that might be caused by unhappiness in the family and to offer support.

In order for teachers to be able to help children, they should be enlightened about divorce and children's adjustment. Seminars and short courses organised by child welfare experts would equip teachers with the necessary skills. Having suggested the above, it should be recognised that teachers may encounter obstacles as they try to help children of divorced parents. For example, some parents do not inform school staff of separations. No parent in this study, and very few in Mitchell (1985) and Wallerstein and Kelly's (1980) had given any information to schools about their

separation. Teachers may also face the problem of confidentiality (see also Mitchell, 1985). Some can feel uncertain as to whether they should pass the information about the separation of a child's parents to other teachers or not. In such situations, the teachers can ask both the child's and parent's opinion. However, if their opinions vary, this can create further uncertainty for the teacher.

So far, we have made broad recommendations about what could be done to reduce the hurt that some children experience as a result of divorce and its related events. The table below simply outlines more specific recommendations for various professionals.

**Table 11 - Recommendations for various professionals**

Lawyers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Advice fathers about the importance of financially supporting their children;</li> <li>b) If mediation services are introduced, lawyers should inform parents about mediation and its advantages</li> </ul>
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Encourage children to use both formal and informal support systems;</li> <li>b) Continue to perform their educational role of observing performance and behaviour problems in children and intervening;</li> <li>c) Could introduce subjects such as personal and social guidance which could provide children with the opportunity to be aware of their rights and to be able to seek help</li> </ul>
Social workers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Teach parents about parenting, emphasising the importance of communicating with children as well as providing them with positive feedback;</li> <li>b) Hold workshops enlightening people about domestic violence</li> </ul>
Police	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Refer abused women and children to agencies that could help them</li> </ul>
Medical personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) Refer abused women and children to appropriate services</li> </ul>



From the recommendations suggested earlier in this paper, the following list of services could be developed to help children and families that have experienced divorce.

- Court connected services such as mediation services
- Community education programs to reach and educate the public about divorce, domestic violence, child support and other related issues
- Classroom education to provide children with divorce oriented education
- Direct services for children and parents that include counselling
- Indirect services like providing training and education on an ongoing basis to professionals that come in contact with children of divorced parents such as lawyers, social workers and teachers. The training and education could focus on divorce related issues and how they affect children, subjects such as domestic violence, how the child support system works, parenting, etc.
- Simple booklets that ordinary parents and children can read about how they can better cope with divorce.

Services tailored to children of divorced parents should however, take into account several factors. First, children's needs may vary depending on their ages, gender, as well as how they have interpreted their experiences before, during and after divorce. Secondly, difficulties experienced by families vary as to magnitude, duration and frequency. Thirdly, divorce is a sensitive issue and not everyone wants to seek help in relation to it. Children and parents may see it as a shameful experience and as such feel reluctant to acknowledge the need for help. Fourthly, parents by virtue of their role as children's gatekeepers may not allow children to participate in services. Given support, children who believe that they have been adversely affected by divorce and related stressors can be helped to cope better.

### ***Implications for research***

This research has shown that children are competent in articulating their experiences and realities. In some cases, they were even able to give more vivid explanations of their experiences and feelings than their mothers were. Therefore, there is need for more research that is open to children's own views. This kind of research is crucial

because it enables children to express issues that are relevant and of priority to them.

There is also great need for statistics on divorce to be collated in Botswana. Currently, the statistics are scattered and not reliable because of reasons outlined in chapter one. The figures should not only specify the number of divorced adults, but more importantly should specify the number of children who are affected by divorce. By taking children as statistical units, we will be treating them as key social actors (see also Qvortrup, 1990). This approach may go a long way to ensure that policies that meet the needs of children are formulated.

Most research from other countries has largely focused on factors that put children at risk of maladaptive behaviour and less on circumstances and processes associated with resilience. This research has shown that despite the adverse situations some children experienced, some believed they coped well. Findings from other countries (e.g. Emery and Forehand, 1994) have also shown that some children of divorced parents are resilient. It is therefore crucial that future research should be directed towards the concept of resiliency and processes that facilitate it.

A majority of children in this study had witnessed violence for several years prior to the divorce and perceived it as a major stressor. Research from western countries (cf. Fantuzzo et al, 1991; Kashani and Allan, 1998) has shown that family conflict and violence contribute to behavioural problems among children. It is therefore important that future research (both qualitative and quantitative) should be conducted on children's exposure to violence. Such research should focus on children's perceptions of violence, their coping methods, as well as the effects of violence on them. Findings of such studies should be disseminated to relevant people so that responsive policies and programmes can be developed for women and children who have been exposed to violence. In addition, it is crucial that evaluative research on the availability of services for children from violent families is conducted.

This study has shown that the child support system was not adequately meeting children's economic needs. There is need to conduct research on how the system could be improved to better meet children's needs.



## ***Methodological and Ethical Implications***

Divorce is a sensitive topic and therefore interviewing people about it raises ethical issues. During the interviews, some children became distressed (partly because they had not previously discussed their divorce-related feelings with other people). Researchers interviewing children have to be cautious not to end the interview before a child has calmed down. In some situations, it may be important for them to make follow-up visits to children to see how they are doing as well as to refer them because some issues discussed during the interview may trigger sad feelings that can create problems for respondents after the interview.

This study has given children the opportunity to voice their experiences. However, children were only involved during the data collection phase (the middle phase). Although this is a good step towards empowering children, it is not enough. Future research should involve children in the planning and dissemination phases (from the beginning to the end) of research. This approach can go a long way in ensuring that children's concerns and perspectives are integrated in the aims of research (see also Hill, 1997).

Lastly, this study has shown that some children's ability to participate might have been limited by their position as inferior to parents. This is particularly so because children whose parents agreed to participate did not have a choice, but also agreed. Similarly, parents can prevent children who want to participate from doing so. Researchers must therefore ask children's consent rather than assume that parents' consent means children have agreed.

## ***Conclusion***

The study has looked at issues, which have been explored largely in the west. Some findings are similar to those of studies from western countries in broad terms, but they manifest themselves differently. These include changes in relations between fathers and children, children's awareness of / exposure to parental violence, a low standard of living following divorce and poor parent-child divorce communication. Domestic violence was a more prominent issue for children in this study than in divorce studies from western countries. This is so because a majority of women

stayed in violent marriages for many years partly because of customary laws that make divorce difficult for women than for men, lack of services and fear of stigma that society attaches to divorced people, unlike in developed countries.

Another way through which findings of this study manifested themselves differently from those of studies from western countries is in relation to services for abused women and their children. In Botswana, there are very few services that are tailored specifically to meet the needs of people in this situation. For example, only one shelter for battered women exists in the whole country, so a majority of women do not have access to services. Furthermore, although children's experience of economic hardship after divorce is well documented in studies from western countries, the hardship may be less severe than those experienced by children in developing countries such as Botswana because welfare programmes in the former countries are more generous and the criteria used to determine eligibility does not exclude able bodied unemployed mothers.

This study has shown that the lives of children who participated in it were situated in a macro environment characterised by gender inequalities and cultural beliefs and values that shape children's experiences. The gender inequalities were most prominent on issues of domestic violence and child support. It has shown that children are viewed as passive, incompetent and vulnerable. This macro environment impacted upon how children experienced divorce as well as how they adjusted to it. Areas that need most attention are material circumstances and domestic violence as well as public education. The practice and policy implications outlined in this chapter are not only applicable to children of divorced parents in Botswana, but they are also applicable to those whose parents are cohabiting. This is particularly so because just like divorce, cohabitation is increasing in the country (Bhebhe and Mosha, 1996). When cohabiting couples separate, their children are likely to experience similar experiences to those of divorcing parents.



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## APPENDIX A

### Children's Interview Schedule

Interview details:

Date:                      Time                      Length of interview:

Gender of the child:                      Age of the child:

Length of time since parental separation:

The below questions were used flexibly to explore issues with each child. The questions which are in bold and which have a star next to them are the main questions. They were asked all respondents. The ones which are not in bold and which do not have a star next to them were asked when there was need. For example, a child who said she / he did not experience domestic violence was not asked questions relating to domestic violence. Questions were asked in the context of a semi-structured interview, so the order and wording was sometimes not as precise as stated in this interview schedule, but was adjusted to the course of the conversation in each interview. The same applied to the parents' interviews. While interviewing, the researcher took into account the child's age, circumstances and wishes. Techniques such as non verbal cues, repeating significant words of a response and others were used to encourage respondents to make further elaborations on their responses.

**Approach:**

*Hello, my name is Tapologo Maundeni. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I would like to begin by going over this consent form. It is important that this form be signed by respondents to show that they are voluntarily taking part in a research project. It briefly explains what we will be doing. Before we begin, do you have any questions you would like to ask me?*

*I am interested in hearing about your experiences of parental separation and the part played by people you know during and after your parents separated. There are a number of questions which I would like to ask you about this. Everything*



*you say will be private and confidential unless I learn that you are in some danger. Your name will not be used and no one will know that I interviewed you except your mother. Your mother will not be told anything you tell me or anything that is written.*

#### THE CHILD'S PERCEPTION AND UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTAL SEPARATION

**\* Can you tell me how life was in the family before your parents separated?**

**\* How about now?**

**\* What for you are the most important effects of your parents' separation?**

**\*Some children believe that parents should always stay together, whatever happens, while others believe that parents should separate if they can no longer stay together. What do you think about this?**

**\*What do you think led your parents to separate?**

Do you think your mother and father will ever live together again?(why or why not?)

Do you wish they could live together again?

How might this come about?

Do you think anyone or anything is to blame for your parents' divorce?. If so, who?/ What and why?

**\*How did you feel when your parents were separating?**

**\* How do you feel now about your parents' separation?**

*You have done well in answering the questions on how you see separation. Now I would like us to talk about some things which you have experienced as a result of divorce.*

#### THE PERCEIVED IMPACT OF SEPARATION AND SEPARATION RELATED EVENTS ON THE CHILD

**\* What changes and events took place as a result of your parents' separation?**

The following probes were used to enquire about specific events and changes which usually take place in divorcing families, but which the child might not have mentioned.

-Were there any changes in the family's standard of living following your parents' separation?

-How about changes in your relationship with one or both your parents?

-Did the family change neighbourhoods after parental separation?

-Do you have a step-parent?

*I showed younger children two pictures ( one of an adult hitting another adult and the other one of an adult shouting at another adult). I asked the child what she / he sees in each picture, and then I asked him / her if*

there was any violence between parents? ( physical and verbal).

Violence between parents (if applicable)

- Could you tell me about the violence that took place between your parents? (By violence, I mean physical or verbal) during the following periods:

- prior to the separation;

-after parental separation.

- For how long (e.g weeks, months, years) did you and your mother stay in the violent home?

- What do you think made mum stay in the violent relationship for so long?

-How frequently did you experience physical and verbal violence between parents prior to the separation and after separation? (daily, weekly, etc).

-Did your parents do anything to stop you seeing the violence?

- How do you think the physical and verbal violence affected you? for example:

-the way you felt

-your own behaviour now and in the future

-your relationships with friends?

-your school performance?

- your attitude towards:

contact with your father

marriage

men in general

- Were parents ever violent to you?

- How did that affect you? ( physically, the way you felt, and your behaviour).



- Did the perpetrator / s of the violence influence your contact with people that could help you such as friends, neighbours and professionals?
- Which of these faces shows how you reacted to violence and conflicts between your parents? (to younger children)
- Could you tell me how you dealt with the experience of parental violence?

For example, some children: engage in other activities to try to forget it; some talk about it with other people; some cry; some blame themselves; some become angry, violent; some ignore the problem,; some withdraw; some seek spiritual support; wishful thinking; some use confrontation.

#### **Economic Changes ( If applicable)**

- Did the separation make any difference to how well the family was?
- How did the fact that the family got better / worse off affect you?
- Were your basic needs ( e.g. food, health care, shelter, etc) met.
- Are there things/commodities you miss or you don't posses which you used to posses when your parents were still together? For example, school shoes.
- Give examples.
- Are there things you have now that you did not have when your parents were still living together? - Give examples.
- How did you deal with the changes in the family's standard of living?

#### **Changes in Parent-Child Relationships ( If applicable)**

- Could you tell me about changes in your relationship with your father that took place following divorce?
- How did the changes affect you?
- How often do you meet with your father?
- Do you enjoy / like the meetings? Tell me more about that...
- Is there anything you don't like about the meetings?
- Has parental divorce brought any changes to the help you used to receive from your father? ( Tell me more about that.....)
- How did you cope with the changes in the relationship with your father?

*Now I would like us to talk a little bit about your relationship with your mother.*

- Could you tell me about the changes that took place in your relationship with your mother following divorce.

- How did the changes in your relationship with your mother affect you?
- Has parental separation brought any changes to the help you used to receive from your mother prior to the separation?
- How did you deal with the changes in your relationship with your mother?

#### **Change of Neighbourhoods ( If applicable )**

- How many times did you change neighbourhoods after your parents separated?
- Could you tell me more about that..

- How does the new neighbourhood differ from the one you lived in before divorce?
- What do you miss from the neighbourhood you lived in before divorce?
- What are you glad to have left in that neighbourhood?
- What do you like about the new neighbourhood?
- What do you dislike about the new neighbourhood?

#### **Step family life ( If applicable)**

- Could you tell me about how life is for you in a step-family.
- How is your relationship with your step father?
- How does your relationship with your step father affect you?
- Do you have step siblings?
- How do you get on with them?
- What is good about them?
- What is bad about them?
- If there is something bad about your step siblings, how does that affect you?
- How do you deal with life in a step-family?

#### **Single parent family life ( If applicable)**

- What are the advantages of being in a single parent family (gains)
- What are the disadvantages of being in a single parent family ( losses)
- How have you coped with single parent family life?

#### **Absence of the father in the family**

- What are the effects ( gains and losses) of the absence of your father in the family on you?
- How did you deal with the absence?



**\* Now, I would like to ask you if there were any changes in your school performance before, during and after divorce? (Tell me more about that...)**

**\*Communication about divorce and help seeking**

*Now we are going to talk about communication and help seeking. All of us sometimes share our concerns and experiences with other people. When you are pleased about something, for example, you can share the good news with your parents or a friend. Similarly, when someone has bullied you in the mall, you may want to share your frustration with someone. Sometimes when something happens around us that we do not understand, we get confused and we wish someone could explain what is taking place to us and that we could be able to ask questions. Some things we don't tell any body about.*

**\* Could you tell me how you found out about your parents' separation?**

**\* Could you tell me what mum, dad, etc said to you about the separation?**

**\* What did you say to them?**

**\* Did anyone say it should be kept secret from other people?**

**\* Were you allowed and encouraged to ask questions and seek clarification?**

- Were you satisfied with the way they talked to you about the divorce?, If you were not,

-Did you have any questions which you wished you could have asked and got answers to? Could you give examples of such questions....

-How do you think the lack of communication with you about the separation affected you?

**\* Who did you talk to about the divorce?**

**\* Why did you choose to tell that person / those people?**

**\* How did the person / the people you told respond when you told them or sought help?**

Were there people you particularly did not want to tell? Why?

**\* Were you asked which parent you prefer to stay with?**

If you were asked, which parent would you have preferred?

**\* Were you asked about whether you want to continue ( having contact with your father) seeing your father and how often?**

- \* **Would it have helped to talk with an expert, with other children in a similar situation, etc at the time of the separation? ( elaborate)**

### **Social networks of children during parental separation and after**

We are going to talk about the people that are important to you or those that you have contact with.

- \* **Who did you confide in?**
- \* **Who listened carefully to your concerns?**
- \* **Who gave advice?**
- \* **Who provided emotional support to you / helped you with your feelings?**
- \* **Who provided spiritual support?**
- \* **Who helped with money and material things?**
- \* **How about your father, did he help with money and material things? Tell me more about that....**
- \* **What do you think made your father not to help you with money and material things? ( if applicable).**
- \* **Who helped with services, e.g. taking you to the clinic?**
- \* **Who played / spent leisure time with you?**
- \* **Who showed interest in your school work?**
- \* **Who told you good things about yourself?**
- \* **Who criticised you?**

### **Peers and Siblings**

Now we are going to talk a little bit about other children, young people and siblings ( your brothers and sisters).

- \* **Could you tell me how peers ( other children and young people) influenced how you coped with separation?**
  - **Did you seek any help (e.g confiding in them ) from your other children when your parents were separating?**
  - **How did they respond? ( did you feel like they welcomed and sympathised with you or you felt that they were isolating you)**
  - **How did you deal with their response?**
  - **What kind of help did they give?**



-Were you comfortable about sharing your concerns about parental separation with your peers? ( Tell me more about that.....)

-What are the age ranges of your peers and friends?

\* Could you tell me how your brothers and sisters influenced how you coped with separation?

- -How many siblings do you have and what are their ages?

- Are you staying with all your siblings?

- Did you seek any help from your siblings when your parents were separating?

-How did they respond?

-How did you deal with their response?

-What kind of help did they give?

-How did you cope with separation from your brothers and sisters?

\* *Sometimes people can be helpful to us, while in other times they can cause stress to us.*

Is there anyone who sometimes makes ( made)you feel sad,

Who and

How

\* Which other people caused you distress?

\* What did they do or how did they behave that made you to feel bad? (Tell me more about that..)

**Role of grand parents and other relatives of your mother and father in your life before and after separation**

\* Do you have grand parents?

\* How was your relationship with them before divorce?

\* How is it now?

\* I would like to know how often you met your father's relatives before separation, and if they used to provide you with some help? ( Tell me more about that...)

\* How about now?

\* I would like to know how often you met your mother's relatives before separation, and the kind of help they provided to you.

- \* Which people did you find most helpful and in what way?**
- \*What other sort of help would have helped you to deal better with your parents' separation?**
- \*In conclusion, would say separation / divorce caused you more stress than other difficulties you've had?**

### ***General Conclusions***

- \* What are the three best events that have happened to you during the past four years?**
- \* What are the three worst things that have happened to you during the past 4 years?**
- \* What have you learned from the experience of your parents's separation?**
- \* What would you try to do differently from what your parents did when you have children yourself?**
- \* What advice would you give to children whose parents separated?**
- \* What advice would you give to parents who are separating or separated as far as children are concerned?**

***-We have come to the end of our interview, do you have any issues that you want to bring up?***

***-\*Of all the things you said during the interview today, what would you like to emphasise?***

***\*How do you feel about your participation in the interview?***

***I would once more like to remind you that every thing that you said is confidential and that no one will know about it.***

***Thank you very much for your participation.***



## APPENDIX B

### Custodial mothers' interview schedule

*Thank you for agreeing to participate in the interview and for also allowing me to interview your child / children. The purpose of the interview is to understand children's experiences of the separation and divorce, not the mothers'. However, at times mothers' experiences influence children's experiences, so feel free to share with me some of your experiences which have influenced your children's. Before starting the interview, I would like us to go over the consent form so that I make sure that you understand its contents fully ( I explained the contents of the form to the respondent and asked the respondent if she had any questions).*

Before we begin our interview, I would like to get some information about your children and your family. This information will enable me to know the range of families included in this study.

1. How many children do you have?
2. Do you live with all of them?
3. What are their ages and gender?
4. For how many years were you married?
5. How long ago did you divorce?

*Okay, this gives me a good start in understanding your family's situation. Now I would like to ask you about.....*

#### Mother's perception of the divorce / separation

*Note: The below open ended questions were asked at the beginning of the interview to enable the mothers to give me detailed accounts of their families. The information was extremely helpful during the course of the interview, as I kept referring to it. In addition the openness of the questions facilitated the establishment of rapport.*

- \* What do you think caused the divorce?
- \* Could you tell me about how life in the family was before the separation.
- \* How is life in the family now?

**\* What was your child's perception / understanding of separation at the time of the separation?**

**\*What is his/ her perception now?**

### **Communication with children about divorce**

Now I would like us to talk about communication about divorce.

**\* I would like to know your thoughts about communicating with children about divorce? Elaborate on your answer.**

**\* What information was the child given about the divorce?**

**\* Was she / he given the opportunity to express his / her views on issues of custody and access to the non-custodial father?**

**\* What did you say to your child about divorce?**

**\*What was his / her response to what you said?**

-What did you ask them?

-What questions did they ask?

-Were the questions answered?

**\* Did you discuss with the child how separation was going to affect their lives (e.g. issues of change of neighbourhoods, contact with father, etc)**

- If you did not tell your child about the divorce, how did the child learn about it.

- Looking back, are there things you wish you:

a) had told the child

b)had not told him or her

c) had asked him/ her

d) had listened to him/her, but didn't?

- Why didn't you?

**\*Did the child speak with his / her father about the divorce?**

**\*Who else did the child speak with?**

### **Parents' perceptions of how divorce and divorce related events affected their children**

**\* What changes and events took place in the family that are related to separation?**

If the mother did not list all the events that usually take place in divorcing families, I used the following probes:



-Was there any violence in the family before the separation and after?( Violence refers to physical or verbal)

- Did the family experience any economic changes?

-Did the family change neighbourhoods?

- Does the child have a step-parent?

- Did any changes take place in the child's relationship with either yourself or his / her father?

Violence between parents ( If applicable) includes verbal and physical violence.

- Could you tell me about children's experiences of parental physical and verbal violence during the following periods: prior to separation  
after parental separation.

- For how long did the children stay in the violent homes?

- What social factors constrained you from leaving?

- Have/ did you seek any help in relation to the violence?

- What kind of help did you seek and from whom?

- What was their response / What kind of help did they give?

- Tell me about the frequency of the violence both before divorce and after? ( e.g. daily, weekly, fortnightly, etc.)

- Was the child directly exposed to the violence and conflicts? In other words, was the child present or within sight or hearing the parents when they fought and argued or parents took precautions to ensure that children were not directly exposed to it, eg. Sending them to: relatives; friends; shops, etc.

-How do you think parental physical and verbal violence affected your child's?

\* attitude towards contact with his / her father

\* attitude towards men in general

\* attitude towards marriage

\* behaviour? Tell me more about that...

\* school performance

\* relationships with friends

- Has the violence affected the child inside? / the way the child felt. Could you tell me more about that...

- Was any violence inflicted on the child?

- Did the perpetrator of the violence force / make the child or you to be socially isolated from people that could help? Tell me more about that....
- How did the violence that was inflicted on the child affect him / her?
- How did the child deal with the experience of parental physical and verbal violence?

( For example, some children engage in other activities to try to forget it; some talk about it with other people; some cry; some blame themselves; some become angry; violent; some ignore the problem, some withdraw, some seek spiritual support, some keep on wishing that the violence will end, while some use confrontation).

#### **Economic changes ( If applicable)**

- Could you tell me about economic changes that took place in your family following separation.
- How did the changes affect your child.
- How far were the child's basic needs met? ( eg, food, shelter, health care, etc).
- What did she /he go without / miss from the family after separation compared to before separation?
- What does your child have now (in the post divorce family) which he /she did not have before ( in the pre-divorce family)
- How did the child deal with the decline in the economic standard of living?

#### **Changes in Parent-Child Relationships ( If applicable)**

- Could you tell me about the changes in the child's relationship with his / her father that took place following divorce.
- How did the changes affect the child?
- How often does the child meet his /her father?
- Does the child enjoy / like the meetings? ( Tell me more about that)
- Is there anything that the child does not like about the meetings?
- How does the child's less / frequent contact with father affect him/ her?
- What is the child's attitude towards the contact / meetings ( does he/ she like / dislike them?)
- What is your attitude towards the child's contact with his / her father?



- Has parental separation brought any changes to the help that the child used to receive from his / her father ( tell me more about that...)
- How did the child cope with the changes in the relationship with his / her father?

**Now I would like us to talk about the child's relationship with you**

- Could you tell me about the changes that took place in your relationship with your child following divorce.
- How did the changes affect the child?
- Has separation brought any changes to the help the child used to receive from you prior to the separation?
- How did the child deal with the changes that took place in your relationship with her / him.

**Change of neighbourhoods ( If applicable)**

- How many times did you and your child change neighbourhoods after divorce?. Tell me more about that...
- How does the new neighbourhood differ from the one you lived in before divorce?
- What does your child miss from the neighbourhood she /he stayed in before divorce?
- What is the child glad to have left in that neighbourhood?
- What does the child like about the new neighbourhood?
- What does the child dislike about the new neighbourhood?

**Step family life ( If applicable)**

- Could you tell me about how life is for your child in a step-family.
- How is the child's relationship with his /her step father?
- How does the child's relationship with his /her step father affect him/ her?
- Does the child have step siblings?
- How do they get along with each other? Could you tell me more about that.....
- What is good about the child's step siblings?
- What is bad about them?
- How do you think the relationship of the child with step siblings affects her /him.
- How does the child deal with step family life?

**Single parent family life ( If applicable)**

- What are the advantages if any of being in a single parent family for the child?

- What are the disadvantages if any?
- How has your child adjusted to living with a single parent?
- In some families, the responsibility of disciplining children lies largely with the father / the man, I would like to know if that was the case in your family prior to divorce. If that was the case, did you experience any problems in disciplining the children after their father left? ( Could you tell me more about that)
- How did you deal with that?

• **The absence of the biological father in the family**

- **What are the effects ( gains and losses) of the absence of your child's father on him / her?**
- **How did the child deal with the absence of the father in the family?**
- **Were there any changes in the child's school performance before, during and after the separation? ( I would like to hear more about that...)**

• **Children's feelings and attitudes towards the divorce**

*Some of the things which parents do or experience tend to affect children in one way or another. However sometimes as parents, we may be not aware of how children are affected until after sometime.*

- **How do you think your child felt when you were separating?**
- **How did you assess the child's feelings ( did you talk to him / her or you observed her or you just assumed)**
- **What feelings and attitudes do you think your child has now about the divorce?**
- **What did the child gain as a result of the divorce/ strengths that the child have acquired in the course of experiencing the divorce?**
- **What did he / she lose as a result of the divorce?**

**Social networks of children during and after parental divorce**

*Now I would like us to talk about people whom your child has contact with. The purpose of this discussion is to get an understanding of who provided help to your child, what kind of help was provided and who did not provide help, and how such people added stress to your child during the period of divorce and separation.*



- who did the child confide in?
- who listened carefully to the child's concerns?
- who gave advice?
- Who provided emotional support to the child/ who helped the child with her feelings?
- who provided spiritual support?
- who helped with money and material things?
- who helped with services, e.g. taking child to clinic?
- who played / spent leisure time with the child?
- who added stress to the child during the period :
  - Before divorce( how)?
  - Now( how)?
- who showed interest in school?
- who provided positive feedback to the child?
- who criticised the child?

*Note: If the responses from the mother on the above questions did not cover in detail the role of grandparents, and that of relatives of the child's father and mother, on the child's adjustment, the following questions were asked to get more information:*

- How big a part did the child's grandparents play in the child's adjustment?
- Could you tell me more about that...
- What factors hindered them from playing a more significant role in the adjustment of children? (e.g. they are very old, are sick, live far from Gaborone, etc).
- How often did the child meet with his / her father's relatives before separation, and if they used to provide the child with some help? ( Tell me more about that..)
- How about now?
- I would like to know how often the child met with your relatives before separation, and the kind of help they used to provide to the child?
- How about now?

### **Peers and Siblings**

Now I would like us to talk about how other children and the child's brothers and sister influenced how he / she coped with separation

**\* Could you tell me how the child's peers influenced how she / he coped with separation?**

-Did the child seek any help from peers?

-How did they respond

-How did the child deal with their response?

-What kind of help did they give to the child?

-Was the child comfortable in sharing his / her separation concerns with peers?

**\* Could you tell me how the child's siblings influenced how the child coped with separation?**

-Did the child seek help from siblings?

-What was their response?

-How did the child deal with their response?

-What kind of help did they give?

- Is the child staying with all his /her siblings?

- How did the child cope with separation from siblings.

*Now I would like us to talk a little bit about four issues which are common in most divorcing families. These are : child custody , child support payments and division of property.*

**\* How was custody determined?**

**\* Was the child's father ordered to pay child support by the court?**

**\* How much was he supposed to pay?**

**\*Is he complying with the court order, (could you tell me more about that).**

- What do you think makes the father of the child not to pay child support?

- What efforts have you taken to address the situation / to make the father of your child to pay child support?

- What was / were the outcomes of such efforts?

**\*Do you think marital property was divided fairly by the court?**

**\* How has this affected the child?**

**\* Which professionals or agencies were the family involved with during and after divorce?**

**\* Which of the above were involved with the child?**



**\*What role did they play in the child's adjustment?**

**\*Which people were most helpful to the child and in what way?**

**\* What other sort of help would have helped the child to cope better with divorce?**

### **Ending**

**\* What advice would you give to parents who are: a) planning to separate b) have separated.**

**\* What are the 3 best things that have happened to your child in the past four years**

**\* What are the 3 worst things that have happened to your child during the past four years.**

**\* In conclusion, would you say separation and divorce were major stressors to your child or not, compared to other stressors that your child has experienced in the past 4 years.**

**Before we come to the end of the interview, I would like to ask you a few questions about you and your ex-husband. These questions like the ones about children which I asked at the beginning of the interview will help me to see if a wide range of families were included in the study.**

**\* How old are you?**

**\* Were you working prior to the divorce? If yes, what is your job?**

**\* Are you working now? If yes, what is your job?**

**\*What is your educational background? Or What qualifications do you have?**

**\* Which tribe do you come from?**

**\* Was your ex-husband working prior to divorce? If yes, what kind of job was he doing?**

**\* What is his educational background? Or what qualifications does he have?**

**\*Which tribe does he come from?**

***-We have come to the end of the interview:***

*-\*Of all the things you said during the interview, what has been the most important / what would you like to emphasise?*

*\*Do you have any issues you want to bring up?*

*-\*How do you feel about your participation in this interview?*

*- I just want to remind you once again, that everything that you said in this interview is confidential and no body will know about it.*

*- Thank you very much for your participation in this interview and for allowing me to interview your child.*



## APPENDIX C

### The Author's Publications and Conference Papers in the Field of Children and Divorce

Maundeni, T. (2000a) The Impact of Parental Separation and Divorce on Children: A Southern African Perspective. In Rwomire, A. (ed.), *African Women and Children: Crisis and Response*, Chapter 2, Greenwood Publishing Group, New York, Praeger.

Maundeni, T. (2000b) The Consequences of Parental Separation and Divorce for the Economic, Social and Emotional Circumstances of Children in Botswana. *Childhood*, vol. 7 (2) 213-223.

Maundeni, T. 'The Role of Social Networks in the Adjustment of Children to Divorce in Botswana: Children and Mothers' Perceptions. Paper Presented at the International Sunbelt XX Social Network Conference, April 13-16, 2000, Vancouver, Canada.