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CHILDREN'S EXPERIENCE OF PARENTAL DIVORCE DISCLOSURE:  
A LOOK AT INTRAFAMILIAL DIFFERENCES

by

Heather Westberg

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Family and Human Development

Approved:

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2000

## ABSTRACT

Children's Experience of Parental Divorce Disclosure:

A Look at Intrafamilial Differences

by

Heather Westberg, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2000

Major Professor: Dr. Thorana S. Nelson  
Department: Family and Human Development

This study explores one aspect of the divorce process, divorce disclosure, to learn more about adult children's perceptions of that experience. Research questions examined participants' perceptions of how they were informed of their parents' divorce, their reactions to the news, and also how they would have preferred to have been told. Within this framework, the study additionally looks at similarities and differences between the experiences of siblings. Twenty siblings from eight different families were interviewed.

The most significant findings were that divorce disclosure occurred most often with only one parent present with most participants being informed in a manner different than their siblings. Furthermore, initial reactions to the news were related to the perception of conditions being relatively better or worse after the divorce, and although participants had clear preferences for divorce disclosure, they questioned whether those

preferences would have been possible with their parents.

(98 pages)

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I would also like to thank my family, not only for their love and encouragement, but also for inspiring me with the idea in the first place. Finally, I give sincere appreciation to my dad for believing in me and helping me to realize my potential. Anything is possible when you have a cheerleading section.

Heather Westberg

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Overview

Divorce has become a common experience for children. It is estimated that one out of every two children will experience the divorce of their parents before the age of 18 (Emery, 1988; Furstenberg, 1990). Since the early 1960s, the number of children affected by divorce has steadily increased (Ducibella, 1995b). According to the National Center for Health Statistics (1995), the number of children involved in divorce per year ranged between 1 and 1.2 million from 1972 to 1990, (these statistics are no longer calculated). Given the significance of the negative effects of divorce on children including lowered scholastic achievements, conduct problems, and poorer self-concepts (Amato, 1994), these statistics are alarming.

Divorce is not a single event that takes place in one moment of time. Rather, it is a process that involves emotional and legal separation and renegotiation of family roles and relationships. Divorce reflects a separation of two people who shared a life together. If the couple has children, then the children are also a part of this process. They are not only affected by the moment when the ink dries on the paper signifying that the divorce is final, but they are affected by many steps and decisions along the way. One significant part of that process is divorce disclosure, or the time when children learn that their parents are divorcing.

Every couple with children that decides to end their marriage in divorce is faced



with the decision of how to tell their children. They must decide how much to tell, when to tell, and the rationale or reasons that will be given for the separation. Some parents may choose to disclose little or to discuss the issue in an ambiguous manner in an effort to protect their children or to prevent a negative reaction from their children. These concerns are important because the manner in which parents tell their children about their decision to divorce (e.g., who is present, how many days or months before the separation) could have an impact on aspects of their children's well-being and adjustment (Ducibella, 1995b; Thomas, Booth-Butterfield, & Booth-Butterfield, 1995).

Many couples facing the divorce decision have more than one child. They must decide whether to tell each child in the same or a different manner and whether to tell all of them at the same time or individually. The gender of the children, their stages of development, and/or their personality characteristics may influence these decisions. Even if the couple decides to tell their children at the same time and in precisely the same manner, the children will likely experience this event differently based on their gender, stage of development, personality characteristics, and relationship with parents and siblings. Thus, there likely will exist intrafamilial differences in children's experiences of the divorce disclosure process as well as interfamilial differences.

#### Rationale

There is a great deal of literature that investigates and describes the effects that the entire process of divorce has on children. From this, we know that divorce, in general, has an impact. However, we do not know how much of an impact specific parts of that

process have on children. Therefore, this study explores one of those parts, divorce disclosure, to learn more about children's perceptions of that experience.

In a search of approximately 3,000 published sources regarding children of divorce conducted by Ducibella (1995b), only 13 studies were found that even tangentially addressed the issue of informing children of their parents' decision to divorce. Only 2 of these 13 studies actually focused on informing the child (Cushman & Cahn, 1986; Rosenthal, 1979). Not only are the studies limited in terms of number, but they are also fairly outdated, and there have been no publications since Ducibella's in 1995. In addition, with the exception of Ducibella (1995a) there has been virtually no attempt to relate the type of account a child receives of the divorce decision with child outcomes.

The few studies that have been conducted have suggested that parents address, or do not address, this issue in a variety of ways (Jacobson, 1978; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Waldron, Ching, & Fair, 1986). Parents may tell their children as a couple or separately, with other siblings present or individually. It should not be assumed, however, that all parents rationally decide when and how to tell their children about the divorce. In fact, Jacobson (1978) found that as many as one third of children were not informed by their parents about the divorce before it occurred. It should be noted that some of these parents may have made a conscious decision not to tell their children.

Presently there exists a plethora of "pop" literature (Ackerman, 1997; Lansky, 1989) directed at parents, telling them how to inform children about their divorce. This literature is based mostly on the opinions and experiences of the respective authors and is

not empirically based. Parents do not have access to an adequate, empirically-based model from which to base their divorce disclosure strategy to their children. More research is needed in this area in order to provide parents with a model for how to inform children of their divorce decision.

To date, most research in the family sciences, in general, has focused on identifying between-family factors that influence child development rather than within-family differences (Quittner & Opiari, 1994). Because between-family differences often do not account for substantial proportions of the variance in child outcomes, a closer look at within-family differences appears to be in order (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). None of the previously conducted research on divorce disclosure has studied the experiences of siblings. Differential treatment of siblings in other areas of parenting (Deater-Deckard, 1996; Quittner & Opiari, 1994; Thomas, 1983) suggests that some parents may handle the disclosure of divorce differently for each of their children.

#### Statement of Problem

Although a great deal of research has been devoted to studying the effects of the entire divorce process on children, a relatively small amount has been directed at discovering how parents discuss divorce with their children and the impact it has on them. In order to more fully understand this phenomenon and its outcomes, we need to better understand children's experiences when they are told about their parents' divorce.

## Theoretical Framework

Symbolic interactionism is a “frame of reference for understanding how humans, in concert with one another, create symbolic worlds and how these worlds, in turn, shape human behavior” (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 136). It is concerned with how humans make meaning of their social worlds and form their identities through social interaction. The family is the immediate social world of children. The socialization that children receive in their families contributes to the way they perceive the world around them and their concept of self.

This perspective leads one to question the process by which family members create a shared, or unshared, sense of the world (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993). How do families communicate and what significance do they place on this communication? How do children establish for themselves their own perceptions of reality based upon their socialization experiences in their families? How do siblings who were raised in the same family arrive at different senses of reality, with varying meanings, beliefs, and dreams? On the other hand, how do families transmit a shared sense of reality and instill in their members common goals and attributes?

The experience of divorce disclosure is evaluated by children based on the meaning the social interaction has for them. Their reaction to the interaction is based on their perception of the event. Thus, children in the same family may react to divorce disclosure in varying ways. Without taking these factors into account, the divorce disclosure experience cannot be fully understood.

## Objectives

This study seeks to understand the intrafamilial experiences of children in relation to the manner in which they were informed of their parents' decision to divorce. It explores within-family variations in parental disclosure and the impact these variations have on children. It also investigates children's preferences for how to be told of an impending divorce. Because the study is exploratory in nature, no formal hypotheses were formed.

The research questions are:

1. What are adults' perceptions of how they were informed about their parents' divorce?
2. What are adults' perceptions of their reactions to the divorce disclosure experience?
3. How do adults think they would have preferred to have been told about their parents' divorce?

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are several areas of research that apply to the research questions. They are first, divorce and its impact on children; second, how children are informed of divorce; and third, intrafamilial differences or differential parental treatment of siblings. These areas are presented in this order followed by a synthesis of the literature.

#### Divorce and Its Impact on Children

Divorce in Western culture has become a normative event. Most disruptions of marriage are no longer due to parental death, as was the case in the beginning of the last century, but rather are the result of a conscious decision to divorce (Seltzer, 1994). Research has shown that over the last century parents have become more likely to divorce, even when they think divorce may not be in the child's best interest (Thornton, 1985). In 1963, 562,000 children experienced the divorce of their parents (Snapper & Ohms, 1978); between 1972 and 1990, more than one million children per year had their parents' marriage end in divorce (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995).

African American children are especially at risk for parental divorce (Castro Martin & Bumpass, 1989). In addition, divorce rates are higher for couples who married while still in their teens, who lived together prior to marriage, and whose own parents were unmarried at their birth or were separated prior to their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday (Grych & Fincham, 1997). Lower divorce rates are associated with higher levels of education,

marrying later, having been raised in an intact family, and having fewer children (Grych & Fincham, 1997). Given the prevalence of divorce in the U.S., it seems appropriate, if not essential, to examine the effects of divorce on children.

Research has consistently shown that, as a whole, children from divorced families display greater maladjustment than children from intact, two parent families (Amato, 1994; Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1988). Parental separation tends to be emotionally distressing for children. Children typically suffer greater disadvantages, such as declines in financial well-being, as a result of parental separation. School behavior and achievements may suffer, resulting in fewer grades of schooling completed (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). Furthermore, children from single-parent households are more likely to be delinquent than children whose parents stay together (Matsueda & Heimer, 1987).

The vast amount of research that supports the claim that divorce negatively affects children should not be used to suggest that divorce has a negative effect on all children. Contrary to what Wallerstein and Lewis's (1998) study would lead one to believe, there is great variety in the degree to which children are affected, positively and negatively, by divorce. For some children, there appear to be no harmful effects from divorce (Seltzer, 1994). In fact, the effect of divorce may be positive for a child who had been living in a two-parent home that was highly conflictual or alienated (Ahrns, 1994; Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Calvin, 1981; Goode, 1964). Controversy also exists in the area of short-versus long-term effects of divorce (Grych & Fincham, 1997).

When divorce occurs, a reorganization of the family is the immediate result. One parent must move out, daily care decisions for the children must be made, financial

arrangements must be reworked, and perhaps, new family members are added in the event of a remarriage. These transitions may prove difficult for children as their routines and sense of normalcy are interrupted. Children depend upon adults for both their physical and emotional care and, therefore, may feel threatened or concerned when one parent makes a semi-departure from their life (Seltzer, 1994). The way that children find out that one of their parents is departing and that a divorce will occur may also have an impact on children's experience of divorce and its effects.

#### How Children are Informed of Divorce and Their Reactions

Very little research has been conducted on how children are informed of their parents' decision to divorce, especially in comparison to the vast amount that has been written on the prevalence and effects of divorce on children. Of the few studies that do exist, most were conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The findings from these studies are presented below, despite being outdated, because no other research exists. In searching this topic area, Ducibella (1995b) found 13 studies that addressed the issue of informing children of the divorce decision, but only two of these focused specifically on informing the child (Cushman & Cahn, 1986; Rosenthal, 1979).

After reviewing the literature, Ducibella (1995a) studied how children are informed of their parents' divorce decision and how it relates to children's emotional reaction to the news, their view of their relationships with their parents, and how they see their own general ability to cope. He used a highly structured interview format in which responses were limited to Likert scale type answers. For example, for the question,



“When your parents separated, how did you feel?”, the answers ranged from “very unhappy” to “very happy.” This enabled the researcher to conduct statistical analyses on the data.

Interestingly, the two findings determined by the researcher to be most significant did not involve how disclosure was handled; rather, they had to do with the children’s characteristics and their reactions to the news. First, there was an inverse relationship between the degree of unhappiness the child felt at the news and the child’s age. Secondly, there was an inverse relationship between the child’s fear of abandonment and the child’s age at parental separation. Since Ducibella’s work, no research has been published regarding how children are informed about their parents’ divorce. The present study seeks to better understand participants’ perceptions, reactions, and preferences for the divorce disclosure experience. This involves a more in-depth look at participants’ divorce disclosure stories.

Parents do not always tell their children of their decision to divorce (Hingst, 1981; Jacobson, 1978; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979). Jacobson (1978) found that as many as one third of children in his study were not informed by their parents about the divorce. Three of the 12 parents in that study who did not have a discussion with their children reported that they did not see it as necessary because they were sure the children knew what was going on. Waldron et al. (1986) reported that in 18% of the families they studied, no one had told the children (mostly preschoolers) about the separation and in 15% of the families, no one had told the children about the divorce.

The effects of not informing children of the divorce appear to be harmful. A perceived lack of parental openness by children regarding a divorce that is about to take place was found to be associated with long-term negative effects on children's satisfaction with their parents' communication and the children's self-esteem (Thomas et al., 1995). Therefore, withholding or delaying telling children about the divorce decision may result in lower self-esteem and may be harmful to communication interactions with and feelings toward the parents.

Waldron et al. (1986) found that mothers most often inform children of separation (76%) and of divorce (61%). Both parents told the children, either together or separately, about separation 26% of the time and about divorce 37% of the time. Goldstein and Solnit (1984) asserted that a child's confusion about his or her future may be lessened if parents can join together in discussing the divorce with the child. Although ideal, this does not always happen because the parents may be so hostile toward each other that they are unable to unite even for the sake of their children.

Parents must also decide when to inform children of the divorce. Jacobson (1978) found that for parents who had this discussion with their children, the mean time for its occurrence was 13 days prior to the separation. The median was 7.3 days with several children being told the day of the separation. A statistically significant, negative correlation was found between the length of time prior to the separation that the child was informed and the child's antisocial behavior and, also, normal irritability (i.e., the shorter the length of time between disclosure and separation, the more antisocial behavior and irritability in children).

Overall, the initial reaction of children to divorce disclosure was negative (Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Waldron et al., 1986). Ducibella (1995b) combined Hingst's (1981) and Kurdek and Siesky's (1979) studies along with their reaction categories in order to gain a more accurate understanding of children's reactions to the disclosure of divorce. The resultant categories were "clearly unhappy," "angry," "perplexed," "not overly bothered," "happy," "surprised," and "other." The most common response (45%) was "clearly unhappy." "Not overly bothered" was the second most common (22%), with the extreme ends of "angry" and "happy" being the least frequent. The gender of the child also appears to have an effect with boys' crying less, giving no overt reaction more often, and asking more questions in comparison to girls (Kurdek & Siesky, 1979). However, one should not assume that boys are affected less because these results may be confounded with the effects of socialization.

No research has been conducted on children's preferences for divorce disclosure. Therefore, the current study integrates what is already known about parental divorce disclosure with what children report is actually happening, and how they would have preferred disclosure be handled.

#### Intrafamilial Differences

Siblings who are reared in the same family under the seemingly same conditions often end up with contrasting personalities, react to things differently, and have different overall levels of well-being. In fact, it may be that more differences exist within families than between families. Research to date has focused more on between-family variations

than within-family variations (Quittner & Opiari, 1994). But, in order to effectively understand families and their processes, both intra- and interfamilial differences must be considered.

As more research is done in this area, more evidence is gathered that supports the notion that parents treat their children differently (Dunn & McGuire, 1994; Quittner & Opiari, 1994; Stocker, 1995). Social interaction between parents and children may be viewed as a series of actions and reactions (Bell & Chapman, 1986). The behavior of children influences the behavior of parents, and the behavior of parents influences the behavior of children in a circular manner. Furthermore, the overall context or situation influences the behavior of both.

There is support for the claim that certain characteristics of each child evoke differential treatment from parents. Characteristics such as sex, birth order, sex of siblings, and sex of parent may have an effect on parental treatment. Thomas (1983) found that adolescent girls were treated differently as a function of their position in the family structure. Firstborn girls with sisters experienced higher levels of parental support and involvement, while those with brothers received lower support. In another study (Deater-Deckard, 1996), parents reported using similar amounts of physical and verbal control with their children, but differing amounts of negative affect. This negative affect co-varied with the parents' perceptions of differences in their children's behavior.

#### Synthesis of the Literature

Because parental divorce is so prevalent and has the potential to have a negative

impact, any intervention that could promote the well-being of children or help them to handle the divorce process more effectively should be explored. In order to help children in this area, one must first understand more about children's perceptions and reactions to the way they are currently being told. This information, along with children's preferences, will aid in formulating a positive model for divorce disclosure.

Children in different families are told about divorce in various ways, and research on differential treatment of siblings would suggest that it is common for children within the same family to find out about divorce in different ways. Furthermore, in the same way that research has shown that children between families react to the news of divorce differently, children in the same family most likely react in contrasting ways. Exploring the unique intrafamilial experiences of children will provide more understanding and enlightenment into how parents go about disclosing the divorce to each child, and the impact this disclosure has on them.

## CHAPTER III

### METHOD

#### Design

This study explores the intrafamilial experiences of children with regard to parental divorce disclosure. Because the study is exploratory and little is known about this issue, it is more concerned with the depth of children's experiences than with breadth. For this reason the format of the study is qualitative. In-depth interviews were conducted with adults who reflected on their experiences of their parents' divorce disclosure. Their perceptions of the experience along with their reactions to it were investigated. Also, their preferences for how they would like to have been informed, or how they would tell their own children, were explored. Based on the information gathered in the interviews, general themes in the stories were identified. A pilot study of three participants was conducted to test the order and effectiveness of the interview questions and to alert the researcher to issues that may not have been anticipated. Data from these three interviews were included in the final results.

#### Sample

Word of mouth and snowballing techniques were used to obtain a convenience sample. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, it was not necessary that the sample be representative of the total population of children with divorced parents. The purpose of the study is not to generalize; rather, its purpose is to understand the unique

experience of the participants. Family, friends, and acquaintances of the researcher supplied ample referrals. The person giving the referral first obtained permission from the potential participants, after which potential participants were called to assess their willingness to participate and also to determine whether they fit the criteria for this study. Before being interviewed, the potential participant contacted sibling(s) to ensure that at least one of them fit the criteria and would be willing to participate. In general, participants were willing to be interviewed and many expressed excitement about being a part of such a “valuable” project. One potential participant decided not to participate because of personal issues unrelated to the project. Siblings also were willing to participate, with the exception of one family, in which the sibling scheduled for interview cancelled because he did not want to talk about his parents’ divorce.

The sample consisted of 20 adult children from eight families whose parents are divorced. The participants were chosen based on the following criteria: ability to remember the divorce experience and having at least one sibling who also remembered it and was willing to participate. The number of participants per family ranged from one to four. Most commonly the families had two or three participants (three families each), with the outliers—one and four participants—coming from the other two families in the study. Five males and 15 females were interviewed. All participants were full siblings with no half- or step-siblings interviewed.

The participants came from large families ranging in size from three to seven children. The average number of children in each family was about five. The birth order of the children interviewed ranged from first born to fifth. Most of the participants were

either first or second born with seven of each.

The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 51. The average age was 26, while the median and mode were 24. The average age at the time of the divorce was 13.5, with ages ranging from 4 to 23. The average number of years since the divorce was 14 with a range of 1.5 to 42 years. (The median number of years was 7.)

The families were from various parts of the United States, including Utah, California, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and New Jersey. They were predominantly Latter-day Saints (LDS): eighteen participants described themselves as LDS, one as Jehovah's Witness, and one claimed no religion. All participants were Caucasian. Eight were married, two were divorced, and 10 were single (never married). In addition, 10 had children of their own.

The sample was mostly middle class. In describing their families while growing up, 12 of the participants said that their families were middle class, while four said they were blue-collar and another four said they were upper middle-class. All of the participants were high school graduates. Four were college graduates, and another 12 completed at least some college.

## Instruments

### Description of Instruments

The instruments for this study were a demographic questionnaire, standard interview questions, and the interviewer. The demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) asked for basic information (e.g., race, religion, number of siblings) in order to describe



the sample. Standard interview questions were used to obtain the desired information regarding participants' experience of divorce disclosure. A copy of the standard interview questions can be found in Appendix C. An interview format was most appropriate for this research because it provided data rich in detail that could be analyzed within each individual's context. Interviewing siblings produced data that could be examined within each family.

In qualitative research, the interviewer is a critical part of the process. I became interested in the subject of divorce disclosure, particularly as it relates to siblings, because of the experience of my family. My parents separated when I was 14 and they divorced two years later. I have often reflected on the different manner in which disclosure was handled for each of my siblings and myself, and was curious about the experience of other families. I questioned whether my family's experience of differential treatment was typical, or if it was more common for children to find out in a similar manner.

The researcher is the instrument of data collection and therefore uses his/her own skills, traits, and talents to carry out the research (Padgett, 1998). I used my skills as a therapist in interviewing the participants. These skills were especially helpful in probing for information while being aware, and respectful, of the sensitive subject matter. In addition, my therapy background and the divorce of my own parents clued me in to possible feelings and issues experienced by the participants. The researcher is also responsible for interpreting and deriving meaning from the data while being aware of his/her own personal biases. Biases were controlled for as much as possible by use of a standard interview format and by using more than one reader to offer multiple

perspectives. In addition, because no formal hypotheses were formulated before beginning the interviews, the data were able to “speak for themselves” as various themes emerged.

### Interview Process

The study employed a semistructured interview format. The interviews were conducted individually and lasted, on average, 45 minutes to 1 hour. Approximately half the interviews were conducted in person and the other half took place over the phone. There were no apparent differences between interviews conducted in person and those over the phone. Participants spoke as freely over the phone as they did in person with no difference in the length of interviews. The beginning of the interview was spent building trust and rapport with the participants in order to help them to be more comfortable and open with their responses. This was done mostly through “small talk”: identifying common interests, commenting on their home, and so forth. Filling out the demographic (Appendix B) and informed consent (Appendix A) forms first also helped to relieve any possible jitters. These forms were mailed to those who participated in a phone interview.

Specific questions (Appendix C) were asked in an open-ended manner that promoted and did not limit participants’ descriptions of their experiences. Following the outlined questions, and throughout the interview, follow-up questions were asked to clarify thoughts or ideas. Questions also were asked based on the interviews that had already been completed; more information was probed for on specific themes. In order to limit the possibility of being leading, the process used open-ended questions first and then

follow-up and probing questions after participants had a chance to respond. Interviews (including phone interviews) were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. This helped to prevent inaccuracy or incompleteness of the data and supports the validity of the research. During the interviews, information was gathered regarding demographics, family structure and characteristics, who told the children about the divorce, how they were told, their reaction, and how they would have preferred to have been told. Following each interview a contact summary sheet (Appendix D) was filled out by the researcher, commenting on impressions and possible themes and ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A journal was kept by the researcher throughout the analysis process. This journal was referred to throughout the analysis process to provide insight into the researcher's observations and impressions of the participants and their responses, and ideas that could possibly be developed at a later time.

### Reliability and Validity

There are two main issues of reliability in conducting qualitative research. The first is researcher bias: the tendency for the researcher to see what he or she is expecting to see (Maxwell, 1996). This was dealt with by using multiple transcript readers in order to compare interpretations and receive feedback when analyzing the data. Consistency between readers reduced researcher bias. The second issue is reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer: how the participants' answers are influenced by the researcher. This threat was minimized by avoiding leading questions and by being aware of my own biases and opinions (Maxwell, 1996). A standard interview format also assisted in

increasing reliability.

The issue of validity is concerned with whether the data accurately represent the phenomenon. This was addressed in much the same way as reliability. Multiple readers were used as a check for researcher bias, and resulted in validation of themes and categories identified by the researcher. Also, the purity of the data was preserved as much as possible in reports by using direct quotes. In addition, the likelihood of participants' disclosing honest perceptions of their experiences was increased by assuring them of confidentiality. Participants were told that their responses would not be shared with their siblings. This provided the participants with safety and allowed the researcher to have more confidence that the participants provided accurate information regarding their perceptions. Because of their openness in discussing their parents' divorce, it can be assumed that participants felt safe and comfortable during the interview. In addition, validity is strengthened because of the degree to which siblings converged on recollections of divorce disclosure. Those who found out in the same manner described much the same event, at times using the same words and phrases to describe their experiences.

The present study is not largely concerned with the generalizability of the research findings. It is more concerned with understanding the perceptions, feelings, and behavior of individuals in their unique context. Despite this, the study still possesses face generalizability; there is no reason to believe that the results would not apply to the general population (Maxwell, 1996). There is no obvious reason that the themes and

connections identified in the study could not be applied to other people and situations (Becker, 1991; Ragin, 1987).

### Analysis

The data were analyzed throughout the data collection process as each interview was completed. As the data were analyzed, general themes and impressions that were discovered were used to guide subsequent interviews. The first step of analysis was reading and rereading the interview transcripts. While the transcripts were being read, notes and memos of general ideas and impressions were written in the margins of the transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Tentative ideas regarding themes, categories, patterns, and relationships were developed through this process. Next, codes were formulated by breaking down data and rearranging them into categories that could be compared. This involved sorting the data into general themes and issues. The computer software program QSR NUD\*IST (Qualitative Research and Solutions, 1995) was used to assist in this process. The codes were not known, or even hypothesized, before data collection; rather, they were formed during analysis. Although the data were broken down into codes, they also were considered and analyzed together, as a coherent whole. Connections were made between codes as the data were contextualized. Researcher notes and contact summary sheets were used in this process (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Throughout analysis, they were referred to for added insight and clarification. They were especially helpful in offering a more complete understanding of not only what was said, but how it was said; for example, whether respondents' verbal statements matched their

nonverbal cues and overall attitude.

The research questions were used to guide the analysis process. The data obtained from the interviews were rich with detail and interesting experiences. At times, when feeling overwhelmed by the amount of data and diversity of experience, I returned to the original research questions in order to reground myself.

The data were analyzed on several levels. Analysis on each of these levels occurred simultaneously. First, each case was explored individually. Each person's divorce disclosure experience was unique and thus each was evaluated as such. The cases also were looked at intrafamilially. The within-family experiences were analyzed in depth, comparing events and perceptions. Finally, the cases were explored interfamilially, as a whole.

#### Ethical Issues

Although the study did not appear to pose any major ethical threats, there were two areas where precaution was taken. First, in order to minimize fear of identity recognition, the participants were assured confidentiality. The participants were assigned pseudonyms; their real names were not included in the report. Second, because divorce is often an emotional or painful experience, discussing the past may have brought up unresolved issues. Although this did not occur, I was prepared to inform participants of services available in the community if they were upset by the interview.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore adult children's experience of parental divorce disclosure and also their preferences regarding it. Research questions examined participant's perceptions of how they were informed, their reactions to the news, and also how they would have preferred to have been told. Within this framework, the study additionally looks at similarities and differences among the experiences of siblings.

Many interesting themes emerged from the interviews. They are organized by research question beginning with, "How did you find out about your parents' divorce?" followed by, "What was your reaction?" and concluding with, "How would you have preferred to have found out about your parents' divorce?"

#### Research Question One: How the Participant Was Informed

Every family has a story. A divorced family is no different. The stories that emerged in this study were unique and interesting and offer insight into the divorce disclosure experience of the participants. First, each family's story is presented to give the reader a glimpse into the experience of its members and to provide a foundation from which to understand this and the remaining research questions. Next, three main themes are identified and discussed. These are first, the moment of disclosure is memorable. Second, disclosure for the most part is not an "entire" family affair, meaning that entire

families were not present for disclosure. Third, some siblings were treated differently based both on birth order and age. In the last section, the data are analyzed intrafamiliially.

### Participants' Disclosure Stories

Family B. I interviewed three members of the B family. Derek is 26, Matt is 25, and Samantha is 19. They are the first, second, and fifth children out of six in this family. While growing up in California, they do not remember their parents' having a close relationship. Relationships were complicated by their father's suffering from manic depression. Their parents have been divorced for about 7 years. Derek found out about the divorce before the rest of his family, including his father. His mom told him a couple of months before she separated from his father that "she was getting a divorce and that she wasn't going to tell [his] dad until after they signed the papers on the house" that they were in the process of selling. The rest of the children found out in a family meeting. Samantha remembers that they "sat us all down and told us together . . . in the living room. . . . I'm pretty sure she [mom] said something like, 'We're getting a divorce.'" Matt remembers that the "family meeting" felt like a "normal Family Home Evening" in many ways because, when it was over, everyone went their separate ways and did their own thing. (Family Home Evening refers to a weekly ritual widely practiced by Latter-day Saints, in which the family gathers together for a lesson and/or activity.)

Family C. Only one member of the C family was interviewed. The interview is included in the sample because the participant commented extensively on how her



siblings were informed and reacted. However, it is recognized that these observations are her perceptions of her siblings' experiences. Gretchen, who grew up in Pennsylvania, is 25 years old and the fourth of six children. Her parents divorced 11 years ago. The family is unique for the various stages of development the children were in at the time of the divorce. The children seem to have been grouped in pairs for the way they were informed about the divorce. The two youngest were told by their dad that he was leaving. The two oldest were serving missions for their church at the time of the divorce and found out through a letter from their dad. According to Gretchen, their mom stopped writing the missionary children because she did not want to write to them and "be all negative. . . . So there were two kids, one in Japan and one in England, who had no idea what was going on except for my dad just wrote to them and said, 'I left your mom.'" Gretchen remembers knowing for a long time that her dad would eventually leave. She just did not know when. Gretchen did not have a close relationship with her dad and when he finally did leave, he did not say anything to Gretchen. She recalls realizing for the first time that her parents were going to get divorced: "I think there was just a point in time where my mom came to me and said, 'Gretchen, this is going to happen and I need you to straighten up a little bit and take some responsibility.' And I did." She does not know how her remaining brother found out.

Family F. Two members of the F family were interviewed. Leslie is 26 and Doug is 24. They are the oldest and second oldest of three children. It has been about 6 years since their parents divorced and about 8 years since they separated. While growing up in Michigan, they never suspected that their parents would divorce. For this family,

separation disclosure and divorce disclosure occurred at different times. The family is unique because the decision to separate was made in front of the children and was instigated by the children. Leslie and Doug were upset about their dad's never being home and Leslie was tired of lying to her mom about his whereabouts. So she scheduled an appointment with her dad's therapist. Leslie and Doug confronted their dad at the therapist's, telling him that something had to change. They were surprised when their dad decided to leave their mom. Following the session, they went home and had a family meeting with everyone present including their mom and little brother. Doug recalls saying, "We think if nothing is going to change then you should separate and figure out what you're doing." Then their dad said, "If that's what you want, that's what I'll do." He packed his things and left about a week later. The final decision to divorce was made a couple of years later and was not very memorable to either Leslie or Doug because it did not have the drama of the first disclosure. They both thought their mom probably told them. It should be noted that Leslie and Doug's stories differ slightly. Doug does not remember going to the therapist's. He remembers the discussion taking place only at home.

Family G. I interviewed the oldest three children of the G family: Adrian age 24, Christy age 21, and Danielle age 19. They grew up in Northern Utah and there are five children in their family. They were shocked when their parents started having problems. They attributed the problems to a change in their dad's personality and his not attending church anymore. Their parents have been divorced for a year and a half and were separated off and on for a year before then. Because of the off-and-on separations, which

occurred right up until the divorce was final, it was difficult for them to pinpoint exactly when they found out about the divorce.

Adrian described their mom's gathering the kids together for an "informal talk" in which she told them, "Your dad's not coming around. I don't want him around. I don't want you guys to tell him what I'm doing and we're doing as a family. I want him totally left out there because he doesn't deserve to be around." Christy and Danielle did not remember a family meeting (perhaps because of the off-and-on separations). Christy does not remember ever officially being told that they were separating or divorcing. It was always just "in the back of her [mom's] mind and in the back of our minds." Danielle also does not remember officially hearing about the divorce or separation, but she does remember the first time she heard the possibility of divorce. Her mom asked her if she had noticed anything strange about her dad. Her mom said they were not "clicking" and she was not sure if they were going to get divorced. From that point, Danielle began noticing things that were not right. Danielle recalls: "It was my mom who introduced me to the idea and then the rest, I just connected the dots."

Family H. I interviewed two members of the H family. Rachel is 51 and Collette is 49. They are the oldest and second oldest of five children. It has been approximately 43 years since their parents' divorce. They grew up in California where, at that time, there was an interlocutory period, which Collette thinks lasted one year, during which their parents were separated and waiting for their divorce to be finalized. This was an especially difficult period for Collette, who remembers her dad's using the children as pawns to try to get back together with her mother. Rachel does not remember finding out

about the divorce but she is sure that her mom must have told her. Collette has vivid memories of the divorce disclosure experience. She recalls:

I remember one night being in my bedroom . . . in a lower bunk bed and mom coming in and telling Rachel and I [sic] both as I sat on the bed, "Your dad and I are going to get a divorce." I remember her saying that: "divorced."

Family K. I interviewed all three children of the K family, who grew up in Washington state. Will is 30, Jessica is 24, and Allison is 19. Their parents have been divorced for 15 years. The parents' relationship was very volatile and Will's father was abusive towards him. Each of the children found out about the divorce in a different manner. Similar to Derek B, Will found out about the possibility of a divorce before his dad. Will recalls: "We [mom and Will] were sitting in the living room of our house, and she asked me what I thought if she got a divorce from my dad. I said, 'I think it would be great.'" Later when he saw his dad pack his things, he assumed that meant they were divorcing.

Jessica remembers a lot of fighting between her parents while growing up, and their sometimes mentioning divorce during those fights. Finding out about the final separation stands out to her:

I remember I was sitting on a tall stool or something and my dad was crying. He was very upset and my mom was very upset. I remember him hugging me and saying that he had to go away and that he wasn't going to live at home anymore.

Allison does not remember much about her parents' divorce because she was young (4). She remembers helping her dad pack by putting things in paper bags, but she did not understand why. She does not remember their specifically saying they were getting divorced. Instead, she "grew to understand what was happening."

Family S. I interviewed the oldest two out of three children of the S family.

Andrew is 29 and Erica is 27. They were living in New Jersey until their parents divorced 23 years ago, at which point they moved with their mom to Utah. Andrew's significant memories have to do with the separation disclosure and Erika's significant memories have to do with the divorce disclosure. They are a good example of being told in different ways and by different parents.

Prior to the separation, Andrew, who was closer to his father, remembers this:

My father took me out for a drive one afternoon. I don't know if it was on a Sunday or what, but I remember going for a drive with him and him telling me that he wasn't going to be living with us anymore and that he still loved us, and that he would be close by and he'd see me a lot.

He does not remember much about the divorce disclosure but thinks he found out when his mom told him that they were moving. Andrew had bitter feelings towards his mother for moving them away from their father.

Because Erika was so young, she did not realize that her dad left, but looking back she thinks he left when she was 4. She does, however, remember vividly how she found out they were divorcing, when she was about 6 years old. Around lunchtime her mom got information from her new school in the mail. Erika recalls:

She said that we were moving from New Jersey to Utah and that we were going to have a house there. We were going to go to school there. And this sounds silly but she said we were going to be like the Brady Bunch. . . . I guess she was trying to help us relate to it in a way that we'd understand, like the Brady Bunch, like different parents. . . . I don't remember [their ever saying] we're getting divorced. I just remember them saying, "We're going to move here. Your dad is not coming with us."

Family W. The oldest four of seven children in the W family were interviewed.

Amy is 26, Sarah is 24, Lissa is 22, and Beth is 18. They grew up in Oregon and their parents divorced about 8 years ago; they were separated a year prior to that. For the siblings I interviewed, the most significant disclosure was the one about their parents' separation. They remember very little about being told that the divorce was going to go through. This may be because each of them had little hope for reconciliation and thought that their parents would divorce from the time they separated.

All siblings found out the same way except Amy, who found out about the separation about a month before her siblings. She remembers:

I was really close to my dad at the time, so he confided in me prior to telling any of the other children that he was looking for an apartment. . . . I just remember we were driving and he just basically said [they] were going to separate.

Sarah, Lissa, Beth, and the rest of the children found out about the divorce together (Amy also was present) from their dad who told them in his bedroom. They have similar memories related to the telling that are described well by Amy:

My mom was the one who gathered us together, basically by screaming, "Your father wants to talk to you." So we all gathered around and my dad just basically started to cry and just said, "I've found an apartment and I'm going to be leaving your mother. We're going to be separating."

At least two of them mentioned their dad crying, the little kids' crying, the chair their dad was sitting in, and all of the kids going upstairs and talking and crying in one of the bedrooms together.

Other information: When. All of the participants were told about the divorce, or were aware of it, before it actually happened. None of them found out after the fact. The length of time between when they found out and when the separation/divorce occurred

varied. The W family learned about the divorce with the shortest notice, with their dad's leaving right after he told them. For others, such as the G family, it is difficult to determine how long it was because their parents were separated off and on for about a year. Some of the participants did not remember exactly when the disclosure occurred but knew it was prior to separation.

### Themes

A memorable moment. The first finding, or theme, is that the moment of disclosure is memorable, no matter the length of time since it occurred. This illustrates the significance of this moment and the impact that it has on children. Several of the participants were surprised with how well they were able to remember the disclosure. Matt commented that this memory was especially significant given the fact that he remembers little else from his childhood other than the divorce disclosure family meeting and packing the van when his parents separated. Another participant articulated it this way:

I think it's very, very important that parents know how it can and will affect their kids the rest of their lives, in the approach, the manner, and how they do tell them. It will have a great effect on them emotionally, psychologically. It's not something to just, "Oh, it doesn't matter. I will say and do this to my child."

Participants chose to describe the moment that was most memorable in answering the question, "How did you find out about your parents' divorce?" Some of the participants described finding out about the separation while others described finding out about the divorce. Sometimes these occurred at different times. In choosing which to describe, the participants chose the one that was the most memorable for them, or had the

biggest impact on them. This seems to be the one that was associated with the greatest amount of change. In some cases, if the separation was the most significant, they may not even remember how they found out about the divorce. I repeatedly heard the response “I’m not sure” when I asked how they found out about the divorce after they had described in detail how they found out about the initial separation.

For the purpose of this study, I am not concerned with distinguishing between the separation and divorce disclosure. The reasoning for this is that the participants in the study assumed that when their parents said that they were separating this meant that they would be divorcing eventually. Whether they were told that their parents were separating or divorcing, the message they heard was that their parents would no longer be together. For this reason, I am concerned with the moment that was the most significant for them, regardless of which it is. Therefore, for some this is separation disclosure, for others it is divorce disclosure, and for others they are one and the same.

For many of the participants, where the divorce disclosure occurred was memorable. So much so that, despite the fact that I failed to ask where it occurred, 12 of the participants mentioned where they were in their responses. Sarah W described the “memorableness” of that moment: “It’s something that’s going to stick in their mind forever. I can’t remember much about the divorce, but I will never forget the room. I will never forget where my dad was sitting, what he was sitting on.”

Not an entire “family affair.” The second theme is that disclosure was not a family affair. In other words, it did not take place with mom, dad, and all siblings present. Children found out about their parents’ divorce most often from one parent.



Only two participants found out from both parents (Matt B and Samantha B). The participants' preferred ideal situation (as discussed later) of two parents' showing a united front simply did not exist for the participants in this study. The number of participants who found out from their mom versus their dad was approximately equal with nine finding out from their mom and eight finding out from their dad. It was just as common for families to be told entirely by one parent as for parents to split the responsibility with dads' telling one child and moms' telling another. About half of the participants had at least one sibling missing during disclosure. Seven of these were told alone with only one parent present.

Treatment of siblings. Another theme that emerged from the data is that treatment of siblings was often influenced by birth order and/or age. It is difficult to separate these two factors, since oldest children were generally older in age, while youngest children were mostly younger at the time of the divorce. The differences were most evident in two areas: oldest/older child and youngest child. Oldest children were relied on more than younger children, often serving as their parents' confidant. Thus, they sometimes found out about the divorce before their siblings, or even before the other parent. In three of the families, the oldest was told first, and in two additional families it is likely that the oldest was told first. They also were more vocal about their wishes regarding the divorce, at times encouraging their parents to divorce. Gretchen C is an example of a functional oldest child (i.e., was not an oldest child by birth but took on responsibility of oldest child). She remembers her mom's coming to her and saying, "Gretchen, this is going to happen and I need you to . . . straighten up and take some responsibility."

Youngest children also were treated differently. Although I interviewed only one youngest child, older siblings repeatedly commented that the youngest was sheltered during the divorce. I fondly call this the “youngest syndrome,” meaning that no matter what the age of the youngest child, information is withheld from them perhaps in an attempt to keep them from being harmed. There is also an attitude, no matter what their age, of their not understanding what is going on. For one family, the youngest child, who was 12 at the time, was kept in the dark and not involved in family discussions. Doug F commented, “I think we really left him out of a lot. We just thought he was too young to know what was going on. Now I don’t think [he was too young to understand what was going on].” This “youngest” 12-year-old was treated quite differently from Andrew S who was only six and a half, but happened to be the oldest in his family.

Older siblings often commented that they did not think their younger siblings remembered much about the divorce. This point is arguable given that the younger siblings I interviewed remembered many details about the experience. For example, Erika S, who was about 5 at the time, vividly remembered the Brady Bunch conversation with her mother while her brother Andrew S commented, “I’m surprised she remembers anything, to tell you the truth.” This belief that Erika did not remember much is ironic considering Andrew was only six and a half at the time, not a great deal older.

#### Intrafamilial Comparison

As is evident from the brief descriptions of the families above, most of the participants found out about the divorce in a different manner than their siblings. This

may have been due to the child's age, their relationship with their parent, or any number of other factors. A total of seven participants found out at the same time, in the same manner, as their siblings. These participants came from three families. Within each of those three families, there was at least one additional sibling who found out in a different manner. Therefore, none of the parents told all of their children in the same manner. Gretchen C described this differential treatment when she said, "[They treated us] completely different. If you were to talk to my siblings you'd be shocked about how different all of our stories are."

The words chosen to disclose the decision to divorce varied among participants. Some were told clearly and matter of factly, "We're getting a divorce," while others were told, "Your dad isn't going to live here anymore." Descriptions of what was going to occur (e.g., "We're moving and dad isn't coming with us.") were used more often with younger children. Jessica K recalls: "I remember him hugging me and saying that he had to go away and that he wasn't going to live here anymore." The word "divorced" was used more often with older children. Most of them did not remember the exact words that were used, but knew that it was something to the effect that their parents were getting a divorce.

#### Research Question Two: Reaction to Disclosure

This research question investigated how participants reacted to the news that their parents were divorcing. As was noted previously, this reaction may also have been to the news of separation, depending on which event was described or was most significant.

Reactions to the news of the divorce varied widely among participants and within families. The emotions ranged from sad to happy, upset to relief, shocked to not shocked, and from scared to feeling like it was “no big deal.” Most participants reported feeling many emotions at the same time, sometimes conflicting emotions. In listening to their stories, four significant themes were identified. The first three involve immediate reactions while the fourth is a secondary reaction (a period of time after the disclosure). First, reactions—whether positive, negative, or mixed—were related to the perception that conditions would be relatively better or relatively worse after the divorce. Second, reactions seemed to be influenced by the manner of disclosure. Third, reactions were not a simple matter, often involving many feelings at once. Fourth, when the divorce process extended for a long period of time, the participants developed an attitude of “Get on with it!” Following the discussion of themes, the results of the intrafamilial comparison are presented.

#### Perception of “Better” or “Worse”

The basis for determining their initial reactions seems to have been the perception that conditions would be relatively better or worse after the divorce. Participants who thought that divorce would improve conditions in their family reacted positively, while participants who thought divorce would be harmful for their family reacted negatively. Those who had mixed feelings about the divorce identified areas that would be better because of the divorce and also areas that would be worse. The three categories had almost equal numbers with seven reporting positive reactions, six negative, and five

having mixed feelings.

Positive. The most common positive reactions included feelings of relief and happiness. More than half of the participants (12) mentioned feeling relieved when their parents divorced. These feelings, as noted previously, were associated with the perception that conditions would be relatively better after the divorce. These families were characterized by high levels of conflict and tension, parental discontent, and ineffective communication between parents. Because of these stressful conditions, these participants reported feeling that something had to change. When their parents finally did divorce, they felt relieved. For Will K, who suffered physical abuse from his dad, a new situation was an improvement because it offered the possibility of a better life. He was open with his mom regarding his feelings when she asked him what he would think if she divorced his dad: "I said, 'I think it would be great if you did that. I would like him gone.' . . . I [was] sick of it . . . so when she told me that, I was very happy. . . . I felt a big relief." Erika S had similar feelings about conditions improving. She relates:

I think I may have just been tired of the fighting. . . . So when she said we were going to get a new family, I may have just been really happy about that. . . . I remember feeling excited about going [moving when they got divorced]. I think my mom just made it sound like everything was going to be brand new some place else.

Some of the participants wanted conditions to change so badly that they actually encouraged their parents to divorce. This contributed to feelings of relief and happiness when they did divorce. Adrian G describes this well:

I don't think we were ever sad because it was something we all kind of wanted to come about because he [father] had been so mean to her [mother]. . . . That whole year all of the kids were like, "Come on mom, you need to get going with it [the

divorce] and get on with it and make the break.”

Participants who played an active role in the process were generally in the late teenage years. Their parents also tended to confide in them and rely on them for advice more than their younger children.

The seven participants who reacted positively represented six different families. Therefore, almost all of the families had at least one member who reacted positively.

Negative. The initial reactions of those who reacted negatively most often included crying; feeling distressed; blaming a parent; and feeling sad, angry, or scared. These reactions were associated with the participants’ not wanting the divorce to happen, or feeling that conditions might be worse if their parents did divorce. They did not know what divorce would bring because they had never experienced it, but the idea of their parents’ separating—and everything that came with it—seemed to be worse than if their parents stayed together, even with all the fighting. Common responses included, “I started crying and being upset about it,” “I just didn’t want it to happen,” and “I didn’t want my dad to move out.”

Anger was not identified by the participants as a common reaction. In fact, only one participant mentioned feeling angry about the divorce, and another at the manner in which disclosure was handled. Most often the children felt distressed that one of their parents was going to move out and also scared about the unknown future. Two quotes sum up these feelings very well. Jessica K relates:

I was really upset because I really loved my dad even though I knew he was violent and that he and my mom didn’t get along very well. . . . I remember

feeling bad for him, feeling scared that I didn't know what was going to happen to us.

Amy W, who was quite a bit older, had some of the same feelings regarding her dad's leaving:

I was scared. The thought of him not being at the house scared me because I was closest to him, more so than my mother. . . . I didn't like the fact that he wasn't going to be at the house.

Mixed. Feelings of participants in the mixed category could be considered both positive and negative using the descriptions above. Most of them reported thinking that they did not want the divorce to happen but because conditions were as they were, they thought divorce was the best option. Thus, while they felt some sense that the divorce should occur, they also felt upset that it was occurring. Danielle G describes these feelings well:

It was shocking and it hurt to know that my dad was changing, but because of his different behavior and poor example, I wanted the divorce just because of how unhappy this house was. I just wanted it to be over and done with so we could just go on with our lives. But I still didn't want my parents to get divorced in the first place. . . . [My feelings were] extremely mixed.

Others had mixed feelings because they wanted their parents to get divorced because of all the fighting and tension, but they did not want it to occur because they did not want one of their parents to leave. Thus, they perceived that conditions would be better because their parents would not be fighting anymore, but they would also be worse because one parent would be gone.

#### Reactions Influenced by Disclosure

In addition to the perception of conditions being better or worse following

divorce, the way that the disclosure was handled influenced immediate reactions. Who told them and how they told them affected the way the children thought about the divorce. Some of the participants' reactions were influenced by who told them. Almost all of them mentioned that they would have preferred that both of their parents tell them, but only two of them experienced this. One of the main reasons given for desiring both parents to be present was to lessen the possibility of blaming a parent. The W family tended to place more blame on their dad—who disclosed without his spouse—because they saw him as the one who wanted the divorce, while Collette H blamed her dad because he was not there to defend himself when her mom disclosed.

The manner in which disclosure occurs also is important. Several cases illustrate this point. Being told before her other siblings created pressure for Amy W that she carried for about a month until everyone else found out: "I would have preferred that my dad not tell me anything beforehand because that was a pretty heavy burden to bear. . . . I didn't really feel like I could talk to anyone at that point about it." Leslie F and Doug F experienced guilt because they initiated the talk with their dad. In some ways, they felt responsible for the separation because their parents never took full responsibility. Jessica K, who found out as her dad was crying and packing his stuff while her mother looked on, reacted by feeling bad for her dad and scared. Her parents did not create safety for her by assuring her that everything would be all right. Finally, lest one suppose that all the reactions were negative, the experience of Erika S illustrates that the manner in which her mother handled disclosure can create a positive immediate reaction. Because the move



was presented as exciting and new, Erika S was optimistic about the changes and about getting a new family.

### Many Feelings

The participants reported experiencing many feelings simultaneously at the time of the disclosure. These feelings included relief, happiness, sadness, anger, fear, and shock. Sometimes the feelings conflicted with each other as was described in the section above, “mixed feelings,” while others experienced many feelings that were not necessarily mixed. For example, one might have felt surprised, happy, and relieved. For this reason, “many feelings” is a separate theme.

The most common reaction felt was shock with seven of the participants mentioning that they experienced it. It should be noted that this feeling could also be described as surprise, based on the participants’ descriptions of how they reacted (none of the participants described physiological symptoms of shock). However, the term “shock” will be used in order to be true to the word participants chose to describe their feelings.

Shock was not exclusive to positive or negative reactions. Rather, there were shocked participants in the positive, negative, and mixed categories. For example, Samantha B, who reacted positively, was shocked when her parents told her that they were going to get divorced: “I was shocked but relieved because I felt like my mom was really unhappy, and I wasn’t the happiest. I knew my dad wasn’t happy, so it was really stressful living with him. I was relieved but I was surprised.” Half of the families interviewed had at least one shocked member in them. Typical responses were: “At first I was in shock,” “It didn’t seem real,” and “It was just [a] shock, and I didn’t believe it.”

Those who experienced shock were not oblivious to problems in their parents' marriage. Instead, many of them were aware of the problems but did not think that their parents would actually get divorced. They expressed shock that it could actually happen to their family. One participant commented, "I didn't think they'd get a divorce. I knew that they . . . weren't the happiest married couple, but the divorce was a big shock for me. You just don't think it could happen to your family, especially with seven kids." Those who specifically said that they were not shocked thought of divorce more as a possibility. Derek B saw his parents as separate people, so he was not surprised when they decided to make the separation legal: "It was no biggie. I thought, 'Okay, you guys haven't been all that together in a long time.' It wasn't a surprise to me."

#### "Get On With It!"

The final theme is not drawn from the participants' initial reactions. Instead it is based on reactions that developed when the separation and divorce process was long-lasting. For the participants in this group, divorce was not an event. It was a process that extended, for some, up to 2 years. During this time their parents were separated off and on, and the participants were, at times, unsure of what was going on. As a result, by the time their parents' divorce was finalized, they were relieved that it was finally over. They seemed to have the attitude of "Get on with it," and they may have been encouraging it.

One participant explained:

Pretty much everyone was like, "This has got to come down." We were sick of it. Oh, we were sick of it. . . . We were all really pushing for it, at least my sisters and I. We were pushing for a separate life. This is mom and her life and this is dad and his life, and we'll associate with them separately.

While the separation disclosure was memorable, these participants had difficulty recalling how they found out about their parents' officially divorcing: who told them and how. Typical responses were, "When it comes to the divorce I'm not sure," "I'm not sure who told me. I think it was my mom," and "I don't remember very much about that." Because many of them assumed that their parents would get divorced when they told them they were separating, it was not memorable when they made the final decision to divorce. Sarah W explains: "They went to counseling but I knew just right then it wasn't going to work. I just knew they weren't going to get back together. . . . So once we realized they were separated, we kind of all knew there was no hope." Her sister, Lissa W, related many of the same feelings: "I don't remember any big memory or anything of when it was finalized. . . . When my dad moved out, I just felt, and I got this from my sisters too, it was like he's moving out and he's not coming back."

#### Intrafamilial Comparison

Once again, there was a wide range of experiences in families with some siblings' reacting in similar manners and others' reacting quite differently. Members of half of the families reacted similarly or somewhat similarly and members of the other half reacted with a great deal of variety. In determining whether reactions were similar or different, the same positive, negative, and mixed categories are used.

For the most part, those with the greatest variety were told in different ways, and those with the least were told in the same or in similar ways. For example, Matt B and Samantha B, who reacted mostly similarly (shocked and relieved), found out together at a family meeting. The W family, who found out in the same manner except for Amy W,

reacted somewhat similarly in the sense that they all reacted negatively, although their negative reactions ranged from sad to scared to angry. Finally, the K family, who each found out in a different manner, reacted quite differently. Will K was happy, Jessica K was upset and crying, and Allison K was confused. Another example of variety comes from the H family. Rachel H reported feeling happy and relieved about the divorce, while Collette H was very upset. Collette recalls that when her mom told them, "Rachel didn't act shocked at all. I started crying and being upset by it but Rachel didn't. . . . I remember Rachel being happy and me being upset with her that she was happy about it."

#### Research Question Three: Preferences for Disclosure

This research question explored how participants thought children should find out about their parents' divorce. In responding to this question, the participants replied in terms of how they wished their parents would have told them, and also how they would tell their own children if they were in a similar situation. Their preferences are especially interesting considering the fact that only four of the participants actually liked how they found out and would not have changed anything about that moment. Several themes emerged as participants spoke freely on this matter, but there were two issues that were especially evident in their comments. First, participants had clear preferences for divorce disclosure but they were not sure whether those preferences would have been possible with their parents. Second, participants were uncomfortable with the idea of divorce, especially their own divorce.

“Clear Preferences, BUT . . .”

In responding to the question, “How would you have preferred your parents to tell you,” the participants repeatedly said, “This is how I would have wanted them to tell me, BUT it could not have happened that way because. . . .” Reasons given included that their parents could not have been in the same room together without fighting, they did not have a close relationship with their parents, and their parents were too emotional at the time. It was not difficult for them to identify how they would have liked to have been told, but they often did not think it was possible for disclosure to have occurred that way. For example, Collette H said:

I would have preferred that my mom kept her feelings about my dad to herself and encouraged us kids just to love him because he is our father. But I know those are impossibilities. My mom was scared. She was alone and she had no one to talk to.

Another participant, in giving his preference for his parents’ showing a united front, said, “I would say make it a ‘we’ decision, because then one person is not the bad guy. But then at the same time, I don’t necessarily think that would happen. . . . They’re getting divorced because they can’t work together.” In short, it was easier for participants to talk in hypotheticals. But, for many, when asked how their parents should have dealt with it, they began to think that it was not likely that it could have been handled any better.

Although many of the participants questioned whether their parents would have been capable of handling it any better at the time, they still had clear ideas about how their parents should have handled it and how they would handle it with their own children. These preferences are grouped into four themes: both parents tell, siblings present, communication, and love.

Both parents tell. The most common preference was that both parents participate in telling the children about the divorce and that they handle the telling in a mature manner, meaning that they take responsibility for their own actions and not blame each other. Eighteen of the participants mentioned the importance of this, while only three were fortunate enough to experience it. Those who heard from only one parent heard only one side, which often led to the participants' blaming one of the parents. One participant (Collette H) describes her preference and the effects of being told by one parent, her mom:

I would have wanted it to be mutual. I would have wanted my mom and dad to sit us kids down and together talk to us, because the way it was presented . . . I remember feeling like, "we girls are here and I'm telling you and we're against dad. Dad's the enemy." That's the way it was presented and that's the way I've always thought my dad to be.

It was not always the case that the nondisclosing parent was the one who was blamed. The W children, for example, who were told by their dad while their mom was "nowhere to be found," initially saw the divorce as their dad's fault because he was the one who told them, implying that he was the one who wanted out of the marriage. Beth W explains that she would have wanted both of her parents to tell her:

I remember that [finding out about the divorce] as a horrible experience and I kind of relate that a little to my dad. So maybe that places a little blame on him because my mom was kind of out of the picture and that gave me, at the time, the impression that my dad was telling us because he wanted to leave. . . . Definitely tell together.

Not only should both parents be present, but the manner in which both parents tell their children was also identified as important. Several subthemes or subcategories were evident here. First was the notion that parents show a "united front" by taking

responsibility for their own actions and not place blame on each other. Common suggested phrases included saying, "This is both of our faults" and "This has nothing to do with you [the children]." To illustrate, Andrew S, who witnessed a lot of blame and bad-mouthing between his parents, feels strongly that parents need to show a united front to the children:

I think the first thing you should do is always be supportive of the other parent, even if you personally don't agree with them or what they're saying. . . . I don't think you should show any sort of anger or malice toward the other person in front of the children. In front of the children, you need to show that you're on the same page and everything is good.

Second, participants reported believing that parents need to make a conscious, logical decision how to tell their children. This involves meeting together beforehand to discuss the best way to proceed. Several of the participants mentioned this specifically when they described how they would tell their own children. For example: "I'd probably sit down with my soon to be ex-spouse and have a meeting first with him and decide what we needed to tell them [the kids]." Several of the participants' stories illustrate what happens when parents do not make a conscious, logical decision. For example, Danielle G remembers hearing things "through the grapevine" from extended family members and was never quite sure what was going on. She said:

I would try to catch it the instant it was just a thought crossing and sit my husband down and say, "Okay, this is how we're going to proceed with the kids. I mean, our relationship, we're going to have to figure that out." [I would be] extremely open [with my kids]. And that way the kids know and they are not shocked, or when they hear things from other siblings, or when rumors start flying within the family. My mom's family is very close, so I hear stuff from them about what my dad is doing and what my mom is doing. I didn't like that at all. That really, really ticked me off.

Derek B sums it up well in describing what happens when parents do not make a

conscious decision regarding how to tell their children:

Logically think about how and when rather than emotionally decide how and when, or situationally decide. Emotionally and situationally you don't really decide. It's just kind of whatever happens. You find out however you find out along the way. Think about it. Address it. Make a decision that we're going to do this thing here in Family Home Evening.

Siblings present. The second preference was whether siblings were present.

While this was not mentioned as often as having both parents present, seven of the participants said that they think parents should tell all of their children together. They described a "family meeting" type atmosphere in which both parents would gather the family together and they would discuss the new situation and how it would affect them. An atmosphere similar to Family Home Evening was mentioned by several children. In describing how she would tell her own children, Danielle G said that she would "sit the kids down in the evening and say, 'OK, everyone, no plans tonight.' And just have a big question and answer session."

Many did not mention whether all children should be present; however, they did say that they would tell their children according to their level of understanding. Who is present for the disclosure might be affected by whether or not the siblings had approximately the same level of understanding. For example, parents might decide to tell their two teenage children first in a separate meeting, and tell their preschool-age children at a later time. Respondents repeatedly said that there is a "certain level of appropriateness" that parents must be sensitive to in telling their children.

Communication. Participants also felt strongly about the manner in which the divorce was communicated to them. Two subthemes emerged as participants discussed



communication. First, communication between parents and children should be as open as possible and second, if handled well (i.e., communicated well), the effects of the divorce on the children could be minimized.

Almost all of the participants talked about the importance of open communication between parents and children. This involves two parts: that parents explain the divorce and what is going on, and also that children are able to express their own opinions and ask questions.

Most of the participants said that they wished their parents would have explained things better. For some, this meant explaining what divorce was. Jessica K, who was 8 at the time, said:

I would have liked to have had my mom explain it better. What was going on and why exactly they were getting a divorce, and what exactly divorce was. Divorce means that "mommy and daddy still love you, we don't love each other" kind of thing. Instead of, "I can't wait to get this jerk out of my house! Quick, say goodbye to the kids!"

Others wished that their parents had told them what was going to happen and why. Some common responses were, "Tell them exactly what's going to happen in detail so the kids don't get scared," "It's important to know ahead of time what's going on and some of the thought processes of why they are choosing to get divorced," and "Just be more open with the children."

Another theme that emerged regarding parents' communication with their children was the idea that children are able to learn from their parents' mistakes. Several participants mentioned that it has been helpful when their parents have taken responsibility for their own actions and told their children where they made mistakes in

the marriage. Doug F, who had very strong feelings that divorce is harmful, said, "Just be flat out honest and tell them it was your decision, that it's your fault. . . . You have to be straight across with them and tell them up front why, so at least the kids will learn from it." Lissa W agreed, "Tell your mistakes. Tell your kids not to make those same ones. I just cannot tell you how grateful I am for my parents being open enough to talk about their mistakes to me because I have just learned so much."

The second area of open communication is children voicing their opinions and asking questions. After explaining the divorce and what is going to occur, children should be asked what they think and how they feel, and parents should offer to answer any questions. Many of the participants mentioned the importance of being able to say how they felt, which, unfortunately, did not happen often. Adrian G summed this up well:

Keep it open for the kids to comment. I don't ever remember us commenting on the situation, or ever being asked, "What do you think?" by our mother because I don't think she necessarily wanted to know what we thought. [They never asked,] "What's your opinion?" and "What do we need to do, as parents, to make it easier on the kids?"

Two of the participants offered a suggestion for allowing children to give feedback to their parents following disclosure. As was explained in the section on reaction, because children are often shocked when they find out about the divorce, it may be helpful for the parents to call them together again at a later time to address any questions they might have. Both Amy W and Beth W, who felt very unsupported after their father told them about the divorce, had this idea. In describing how she would handle this with her own kids, Amy said she would

revisit the kids, both of us together [husband and herself] 12 hours later or so. . . . That way we could just answer any questions, clarify that it isn't the fault of the kids, clarify exactly what it is that my husband and I are going through to cause this to happen.

And from her sister, Beth,

I'm sure there's [sic] divorces where the parents afterwards will talk to the kids. I think that's important, that after the fact you keep it an open topic. They should come back and ask how the child is reacting because I didn't really know what to think.

In summary, according to the participants, the manner in which parents communicate to their children affects their perception of the divorce. Many of the participants felt that divorce was less than ideal, but that the effects on the children could be minimized depending on how the parents dealt with it, including how they communicated about it to their children. Amy W explains:

Divorce, in general, is a bad thing, but there's such a thing as a good divorce and a bad divorce. You can take a bad situation and make it the best possible on your children and loved ones if handled appropriately, and if both parents are mature and are able to communicate openly with their children and with each other.

Love. Another theme that emerged from the data was the importance of children feeling loved and secure. Almost half the participants mentioned that children need to know that their parents' divorce had nothing to do with their love for them, and that they would not love them any less afterward. Will K relates:

I think the most important thing is that your kids know that you love them, and that you're not abandoning them, and that no matter what happens, even though mommy and daddy maybe don't love each other anymore, mommy still loves you and I still love you.

Unfortunately, Collette H did not have that experience with her parents. She reflects how she wishes it would have been: "What I would have wanted my parents to do is for them

to show me that they both loved me and that their problems had nothing to do with their love for me. I didn't get that." Those whose parents did not make them feel loved and secure seemed to have spoken more emphatically about the importance of children feeling loved. For example, Leslie F, who felt guilty for many years because she instigated the divorce discussion, explained how she would handle the disclosure with her own children: "I would make sure everybody sat down and all the questions were in the open. I would not let anybody get up unless they believed that they were still loved and it was not their fault."

#### "Divorce Is Uncomfortable"

Although children were able to articulate clear preferences, there was still an underlying theme in several of their stories of being uncomfortable with the idea of divorce. This was manifest in primarily two areas: first, the attitude that there is no "good" way to disclose divorce, and second, participants did not like the idea of getting divorced themselves.

Despite all of the advice regarding how parents should tell their children, three of the participants still said that there really was no good way. Essentially, parents can try to make the effects as minimal as possible, but the kids are still going to suffer. Erika S, who openly admitted that she is still suffering the effects of her parents' divorce that occurred about 20 years ago, said:

I don't think there is a good way to tell them. I don't think there's a good way to tell your kids that because I think when you're a kid, your whole identity is wrapped up in their love for each other because that's what you were supposed to be a part of. When they stop loving each other it's like a part of you dies. . . . So I don't know if there's any good way of telling your kids that.

Almost all of the participants were uncomfortable thinking about the possibility of getting divorced themselves. This was evident when answering the question, "How would you tell your own children about divorce?" The participants hesitated when answering, sighed, and said things such as, "That's a tough one," or "I don't really want to think about that." Two of them, Derek B and Doug F, would not acknowledge it as a possibility and went so far as to not answer the question until it was phrased as, "How would you tell a friend to tell their children?" Doug F related his feelings by saying, "That's really hard to imagine because that's just not going to ever, ever happen." Unfortunately, it may not be realistic to say that it will not happen. In fact, three participants were divorced themselves, including Doug's sister.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

#### Overview

The participants were very open in discussing their parents' divorces. The thought that each of them had given to the experience and their willingness to talk about it was impressive. For them, it was not merely something that happened when they were 8 or 9. Rather, it was something that they have reflected upon and reevaluated as an adult. Many interesting themes emerged from the data that were presented in the results section. This chapter begins with a review and discussion of the significant findings of the study. Next, limitations of the study are explored. Finally, implications and recommendations for clinical practice, future research, and policy are made.

#### Significant Findings

Several significant findings emerged from this study. These results are discussed by research question, beginning with how the participant was informed, followed by participants' reactions, and concluding with the participants' preferences for disclosure. Because the questions are interrelated and have implications for each other, at times findings from one question are discussed when presenting findings from another question.

#### How the Participant Was Informed

The most significant findings in this area are first, divorce disclosure was a memorable experience; second, it was not an "entire" family affair; and third, it was

handled differently for siblings.

Memorable. Although divorce disclosure is only one piece of the divorce process, which many of the participants described as lasting for years, the moment of disclosure was memorable for them. Even those who remembered little else about the divorce or their childhood, remembered the disclosure. This seems to indicate that something about divorce disclosure, in particular, is significant. Thus, as several of the participants commented, it is not something to hurry through or give very little thought or consideration to.

Clearly, divorce disclosure is memorable. So, what is it about that moment that makes it memorable, or more memorable than others? Why did some participants remember separation disclosure vividly but have difficulty recalling the divorce disclosure? One possible explanation is that emotions and memory are connected: the greater the emotions, the more vivid the memories (Pillemer, Goldsmith, Panter, & White, 1988; Reisberg, Heuer, McLean, & O'Shaughnessy, 1988). Change plays a role in creating emotion (Pillemer, 1998). Therefore, participants seemed to have remembered the disclosure (either separation or divorce) that was associated with the greatest amount of change and/or emotion (e.g., surprise, shock, anger, relief). Thus, it is the emotion that makes the moment significant, and to which other memories, such as who told, where they were, and so forth, are tied.

The implications of the memorableness of divorce disclosure are significant. The memorableness of this moment, and the impact it had on future perceptions and reactions as described by the participants, indicates that more attention should be given to helping

parents know the least harmful way to inform children of their decision to divorce. The best suited people to describe the “least harmful” way are those who have actually experienced their parents’ divorce. They know firsthand the results of various divorce disclosure methods and their impact.

The findings for the first research question are made more significant based on the strong preferences participants had for how they would have preferred to have been told about their parents’ divorce. Only four of the participants would not have changed anything about the way that they were told; under the circumstances they felt that it was handled appropriately. All others described what they wish their parents would have done. These findings seem to indicate that divorce disclosure for most participants was a negative memory.

“Entire” family affair. A surprising finding was that nearly all of the participants found out about their parents’ divorce from one parent. This is significant given the number of participants who said that they would have preferred that both of their parents tell them together. Thus, there was a large discrepancy between how participants ideally would have wanted to find out and what actually happened.

The number of children who found out from their father, alone, was also surprising given the typical image of mothers’ telling the children (Ducibella, 1995b). This finding is not consistent with Waldron et al. (1986) who found in their study that fathers almost never told their children alone. In addition, about half of the participants had at least one sibling who was absent from disclosure.

Treatment of siblings. Most of the children found out about their parents’ divorce



in a different manner than their siblings. The most significant finding in this area is that participants appeared to have been told differently based on birth order and age. Oldest children were relied upon more (often serving as their parents' confidant) and, in general, were told about the divorce earlier than the rest of their siblings. For some this proved to be a large burden and they were left feeling unsupported by their parents.

I was surprised at the active role older children played in the divorce process. Older children, especially teenagers, gave more input regarding the decision to divorce. Some of the participants encouraged their parents to divorce when the separation extended for a long period of time, and their opinion seems to have been valued and respected by their parents. Encouraging parents to divorce brings up special concerns. If, as many of the participants said, parents are experiencing a great deal of emotional turmoil at the time and are not able to think clearly, then they may be influenced by their children. How much responsibility should children take, or be given, for initiating or promoting their parents' divorce? These teenagers seem to have been very influential at a time when parents could have been considered quite vulnerable to outside suggestions because of the stress they are under.

Is this too much responsibility for teenagers? Doug F said, "yes." Looking back, he said very sincerely that he would do things differently: "I was 16, like I knew a whole lot, telling my parents to separate." Although they may have good intentions, some might argue that they are operating from a point of view based on limited experience. For example, Derek B (who did not influence his parents either way) felt, at the time, that it was perfectly fine for his parents to divorce, but has since decided, as an adult, that

divorce may not have been the best option. When children offer advice and suggestions to parents, there may be more risk of their feeling responsible for the divorce. On the other hand, one might assert that teenagers may, in some cases, be more able to think clearly than their parents during that time, helping to guide them through the divorce process, or serve as “sounding boards.” The argument continues that older children are more aware of what is going on with their parents and they are more accustomed to offering their opinions about issues. In addition, parents may have grown more accustomed to asking their children for their opinions. In sum, when there are more than two adults (i.e., two parents plus adult children) involved in the divorce process, matters are more complicated.

The other finding of interest is the treatment of youngest siblings. Youngest children were often “sheltered” from the effects of the divorce. There was a general attitude that they either did not know what was going on, or that they did not need to know what was going on. This seemed strange and unusual to me until I put it into the context of my own family, in which my now 17-year-old brother is, and was, treated much the same way. At the time of my parents’ divorce, although he was 7, we discussed the divorce very little with him in an attempt, I suppose, to prevent him from being upset about what was transpiring. Looking back, I realize that we probably did him more harm than good because we were not acknowledging his thoughts, feelings, and experience. It also isolated him from situations during the next 10 years in which we, as siblings, discussed the divorce. He missed out on this “sibling” time during which the rest of us grew closer. Doug F also commented on this very real phenomenon when he said, “I

think we should have included Barry [youngest sibling]. I think it could have pulled us all together, and instead it didn't."

### Reaction to Disclosure

Reactions to disclosure varied widely, even within families. The two most significant findings were that reactions to divorce were influenced by the perception that conditions would be "better" or "worse" after the divorce, and were also influenced by the manner of disclosure. These two ideas will be explored together, followed by a brief intrafamilial comparison.

These findings are especially interesting because roughly the same number of participants were categorized as reacting positively, negatively, and mixed. More than half of the participants mentioned feeling relieved when their parents divorced. They were tired of the fighting and tense conditions between their parents. This implies that it is fairly common for children to want their parents to get divorced because the idea of their separating appears relatively "better" than their staying together. This supports the findings of other studies that suggest that divorce may have a positive effect on children living in homes characterized by high levels of conflict (Ahrons, 1994; Amato et al., 1995; Calvin, 1981; Goode, 1964).

Another interesting implication of these findings has to do with those who had negative and mixed reactions. A few common reactions in these categories were fear, blaming a parent, and feeling upset. If children base their negative reaction on the perception that conditions would be worse when their parents divorce, then it may be instrumental for parents to address those concerns, in an attempt to eliminate at least part

of their negative reaction. For example, if children are afraid because they are unsure of what will happen to them, or worried that they will never see their dad again, it would be helpful for parents to alleviate their fears by telling them exactly what will happen (e.g., "Daddy is moving to another house. We both love you very much. You will be staying in this house with Mommy and Bobby. You will still have the same room and sleep in the same bed. You will see Daddy every morning before school."). This would help to eliminate or reduce some of their negative or mixed feelings, which could be replaced by more positive feelings.

This is not to imply that all negative feelings can, or should, be eliminated through communication. Rather, this is an opportunity for parents to lessen the difficulty created by divorce by attempting to resolve fears and concerns. In some children's eyes, it may never be "better" that their parents got divorced, and they may never react "positively." They may always be sad and life may forever be more complex. However, these data indicate that there are some negative reactions that can be eliminated. The question for parents then becomes "Which negative reactions can be eliminated?" because eliminating some could be better than none.

Negative reactions that are strictly due to the manner of disclosure can be eliminated. For example, the weight an oldest child feels from knowing that her parents are getting divorced before the rest of her siblings could be eliminated by not confiding in her prematurely and then expecting her not to tell anyone. Or, the fear a young child feels for her dad as she watches him cry and pack his things, saying he does not know where he will go, could be alleviated by both parents' calmly telling her where her dad is going and

reassuring her that everything will be all right.

Although the manner in which disclosure occurs is important, it is not the only factor. As was mentioned previously, a great deal of variety existed within the participants' families. For the most part, those with the greatest variety were told in different ways, and those with the least were told in the same, or in similar, ways. This is not to say that being told differently was entirely responsible for creating different reactions, although it may have had some impact. The different reactions could just as easily have been related to the age of the children and their relationship with each of their parents. Inversely, these two factors may also have been responsible for why the children were told differently to begin with. For example, a child who was closer to his father may have been told by him, and also reacted more negatively to the news of the divorce because he would be separated from his father.

In summary, there were just as many siblings who reacted in virtually opposite manners as there were who reacted similarly, or somewhat similarly. It is difficult to determine why these different reactions occurred, but possible factors include age, gender, personality, the manner in which they were told, and their relationships with their parent(s).

#### Preferences for Disclosure

Perhaps the most significant, and somewhat surprising, finding of the study is that of 20 participants, only 4 actually liked how they found out about their parents' divorce. This is important because, as described by the participants, the moment of disclosure is memorable, influences immediate reactions, and has lasting effects. The significance of

this moment was emphasized by the clear preferences for divorce disclosure described by those who know best—children of divorced parents. These participants lived through this experience and, as a result, have developed ideas about how divorce disclosure should be handled. Although divorce disclosure is only one piece of the divorce process, it is significant enough to be remembered years later, and to develop strong preferences and opinions about. The two most significant findings for this research question are first, participants had clear preferences for divorce disclosure but they were not sure whether those preferences would have been possible with their parents, and second, children were uncomfortable with the idea of divorce, especially the possibility of their own divorce.

“Clear preferences, BUT . . .” Participants described strong preferences for divorce disclosure. The most dominant ones were first, both parents be present when they were told; second, communication be open between parents and children, and third; parents reassure children that they are loved in an effort to help them to feel secure. These preferences are helpful in beginning to establish a divorce disclosure model that can serve as a guide for parents. For example, the request that both parents be present in effect creates more security for children. If they are able to see their parents’ showing a “united front” and working together, they are likely to have less fear about the future (e.g., what is going to happen to them, whether they will ever see their parent again) and/or whether they will be forced to choose sides (Goldstein & Solnit, 1984). In essence, they can see that it is all right (and possible!) to have a relationship with both parents even after they are divorced.

The preference for parents to show love and support is also very telling. At a time

when parents may have little control over the marriage that is coming to an end, their soon to be ex-spouse, or the sadness their children may feel from no longer living with two parents, they do have control over how they treat their children. They decide how to tell and show their children that they love them, support them, and are still there for them. Telling and showing children that they are loved, which includes not bad-mouthing their other parent, can do much to alleviate children's fears and create feelings of safety. These safe feelings are critical considering the many changes that are taking place in their lives.

The preference for parents to communicate openly during and after disclosure lends insight into children's experience of the divorce process. Children need time to integrate and make sense of the changes that are going to occur. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of being able to ask questions even after disclosure, illustrating that children need time to process this new information. This is especially important considering the number of participants who reported being surprised or shocked at the news. This preference has further significance considering that how divorce disclosure is handled may influence long-term parent-child relationships. In a study conducted by Thomas et al. (1995), a perceived lack of parental openness regarding divorce was found to be associated with long-term, negative effects on both children's satisfaction with their parents' communication and children's self-esteem. From this, one may conclude that parents need to remain open with their children throughout the divorce process and the readjusting period that follows.

It was not difficult for children to relate how they wish their parents would have handled divorce disclosure. However, after they stated how they wished it would have

been, many of them concluded that those things would not have been possible with their parents. Many felt that the degree of stress and emotional difficulty that their parents were under made them unable to think clearly enough to handle the disclosure properly. Others felt that although they would have wanted both of their parents to tell them and to hear both of their sides, it would not have been possible to tell them together without fighting and creating even more problems.

To illustrate this, the case of Collette H is helpful. During the course of her interview she articulated clear preferences for parental divorce disclosure. She wished that her parents had given her adequate love and reassurance and that her mom had not placed blame on her dad when she disclosed the divorce. After describing in detail the way she wished it would have been, she then related that, unfortunately, she made the same mistakes during her own divorce. Looking back, she would do it quite differently, but at the time she was dealing with so many "issues and problems" that she was not able to think "logically."

This leads one to question whether it is possible for parents to handle disclosure in a beneficial way when they are experiencing so much distress themselves. Despite the responses of many participants that indicate otherwise, other data indicate that it is possible. Even if there were only one case in the last century, then it would be possible. In addition to the B family, in which the parents called a family meeting, told the children together, and asked them if they had any questions or concerns, I know of several other parents who similarly made a conscious decision to tell their children together, and were open with them in communicating their love for them. The reason many in the sample



did not think it was possible may have been because they were not aware of others for which it has been possible.

In dealing with this “but” dilemma, one respondent initially said that she did not think it would have been possible, until she remembered a good friend of hers whose parents are also divorced, but under very different conditions. She questioned why it was that her parents were unable to have a civil conversation while her friend’s parents are able to sit down regularly and talk about the needs of the children. Therefore, perhaps the question is not whether it is possible, since these examples adequately illustrate that it is possible. Instead, the question may be: what makes these parents, or the situations, different? How are they able to do it? And why were the parents in this study (with the exception of the B family) unable to do it? Essentially, what can be learned from these examples that will help other families facing a similar challenge?

“Divorce is uncomfortable.” Despite being able to articulate clear preferences regarding disclosure, there was still an underlying theme in several of the participants’ stories of being uncomfortable with the idea of divorce. This was manifest in primarily two areas. First, the attitude that there is no “good” way to disclose divorce, and second, participants did not like the idea of getting divorced themselves.

The attitude that there is no “good” way to disclose divorce contradicts in some ways the participants who felt that divorce can be either “good” or “bad” depending on how it is handled. The difference may be that the three who felt there was no “good” way seem to have such deep feelings against divorce, in general, that they see it as an impossibility to tell children something “bad” in a “good” way. For them, it may be

easier to think of telling children in a way that is "better" or "worse." These cases illustrate that it is challenging to handle something as difficult as divorce disclosure in a manner that is least problematic.

In general, participants were not advocates of divorce nor were they comfortable thinking about the possibility of getting divorced themselves. At the conclusion of the interviews when given an opportunity to share any additional information or comment on what people need to know about this issue, many noted the harmful effects and consequences of divorce. Almost all of the participants were uncomfortable thinking about the possibility of getting divorced themselves. This illustrates that it is often easier to think that divorce is a possibility for people other than yourself. However, it is probable that most, if not all, of the participants' parents never envisioned getting divorced. Therefore, believing that divorce will not happen to you is not a guarantee that it will not, nor is it likely very realistic. The fact that three of the participants were divorced reinforces this assertion.

Several of the participants firmly declared that they would not get divorced. They were adamant that it was not a possibility. It would be interesting to complete a follow-up study with the same sample in which marital status and attitudes regarding marriage and divorce were reevaluated.

#### Limitations

The generalizability of the findings to the population of children of divorced parents is limited due to the small sample size, its nonrandom selection, and the

homogeneity of class, racial, and religious backgrounds. Although this was appropriate for this exploratory study, larger samples with families that are racially and ethnically diverse would increase the applicability of the findings to the general population.

In addition, the findings also were limited in terms of making intrafamilial comparisons. Ideally, all siblings would have been interviewed in order to offer the most complete description of each family. However, it was not feasible to interview all siblings. This was mostly due to the research protocol that did not allow siblings under age 18 to participate.

Another possible limitation is that participants may not remember the divorce disclosure accurately or completely. Because the participants were adults reflecting on their perception of divorce disclosure, they may have recalled only part of the experience. For example, they may have remembered their moms' talking to them about the divorce, but have no memory of their dads' talking to them a few days later.

### Implications and Recommendations

The findings of this study have implications for clinical practice, further research, and policy. These are outlined below along with recommendations for each area.

#### Clinical Practice

Due to the prevalence of divorce today and the frequency of dealing with divorce issues in therapy, the results of the study are especially applicable to clinical practice, including marital therapy, divorce therapy, and mediation. Disclosing divorce to children is one part of the divorce process about which very little is known except for common

sense advice in a developmental context. Thus, the results are especially helpful for therapists, divorce mediators, and families in deciding together the best plan of action for divorce disclosure. Unfortunately, as most of the participants in this study attest, many families learn too late how best to handle disclosure. The preferences given by participants in this study are helpful for parents dealing with this issue. For example, in general, children want both of their parents to be involved in the divorce process, for them to be open and honest with them, and for them to demonstrate love and concern for them. In addition, they do not want their parents to blame or “bad-mouth” each other. These ideas, alone, could serve as a general guide for divorce disclosure.

Many couples decide to divorce during the course of therapy. Unfortunately, when this decision is made, therapy is often seen as a failure and ends abruptly. Therapists could be extremely helpful at this point in assisting in decisions around disclosure, as well as other aspects of the divorce process. They could help parents understand issues their children may be dealing with, or may deal with in the near future. For example, issues related to insecurity and children’s needing to feel loved and supported could be brought out and dealt with. In addition, discussing the length of time it may take for their children to process this new information and the possibility of having a question and answer period some time after the divorce disclosure would be helpful.

The manner in which therapists address divorce disclosure would depend largely on their therapeutic modality. Three therapeutic models—cognitive-behavioral, solution focused, and structural—are used to illustrate different approaches. Those operating from a cognitive-behavioral model (e.g., Epstein, Schlesinger, & Dryden, 1998) could focus on

introducing skills to reduce cognitive distortions. This would be accomplished by providing information regarding divorce and its effects on children and teaching about the importance of separating marital from parental relations, of both parents being involved in divorce disclosure, demonstrating love, and communicating openly with their children. A behavioral plan of action could be created detailing what each parent would do, when they would do it, and how they would evaluate the outcome and their children's reactions.

A solution-focused therapist (e.g., de Shazer, 1991) on the other hand, may assist parents in developing a plan for disclosing divorce to their children by focusing on prior effective communication between the parents and between the parents and children. Highlighting the exceptions, or the times when messages have been clear and the end result was positive, would provide a model of communication that works for their family. Parents could identify the times when they were able to communicate clearly and effectively with their teenagers, elementary school aged children, and younger children and then pattern disclosure after those experiences.

Finally, structural therapists (e.g., Minuchin, 1974) could focus on boundaries and subsystems within the family and how these relate to divorce disclosure. Although parents are divorcing, they are still the executive subsystem within the family and with that comes the responsibility of discussing divorce with their children. Despite the probability of difficulty working out problems within their marital subsystem, the therapist would unite the couple by helping them to focus on the subsystem they are still a part of (parental) and their common goal: to discuss the divorce with the children in the least harmful way. In addition, the therapist would address the tendency and danger for

boundaries to become permeable during divorce with children being drawn up from the child level to the parental level. For example, one parent may collude with the oldest child while the other parent colludes with another child. A structural therapist would illustrate the importance of being open and honest with children about the divorce while maintaining a clear boundary between the parent and child subsystems. As several of the participants illustrated, being included in the parental subsystem (e.g., hearing about the divorce before other parent or siblings, encouraging the divorce, colluding with one parent while blaming the other) may be harmful.

Therapists serving as mediators could help with these same issues if the couple began working with him/her early enough in the process. Some, but not all, couples begin mediation before they tell their children about the divorce. Mediators who have expertise in this area could be very helpful in guiding divorcing parents through this process in the least harmful way for their children.

#### Future Research

The implications for future research are significant. A logical step forward in understanding divorce disclosure would be to explore parents' experience. This involves their perceptions of divorce disclosure and why they chose to handle it in the manner they did. It would also be interesting to discover whether parents remember disclosure as well, or the same, as children do, implying whether it was as significant for them.

Future research should focus especially on parents who handled divorce disclosure in an informed manner. The fact that this is possible is not enough; we must know how it is possible in order to replicate better conditions for other children. What makes these

parents and situations different? Future research could begin by interviewing the parents of the B family, followed by several others. With this larger sample, children's reactions and perceptions could be compared with those who did not find out in this "ideal" manner.

Research could also center on comparing intergenerational divorce disclosure experiences. Two of the participants, who were sisters, were divorced themselves and their stories highlighted interesting patterns. One participant seemed to tell her children in much the same way that she had described as being harmful from her parents, while the other participant seemed to have told her children in a more beneficial manner. The differences between parents who were able to break from the pattern of how their own parents told them and those who used the same methods could be explored.

The results from this study could also be used to design a larger study in which the long-term effects of divorce disclosure and how they relate to the divorce process are explored using a larger sample. The categories and themes identified in the present study could be tested on a larger sample and then developed into instruments to quantitatively study this phenomenon.

### Policy

The issue of policy presents an interesting dilemma. It would be impossible to establish a policy that called for parents to attend some form of psycho-educational class in which divorce disclosure was discussed. By the time parents get to this point, they most likely have already told their children in some manner that they were divorcing. Divorce education classes are most helpful if they are taken early in the divorce process,

but they are often taken as the last step before the divorce is finalized, if at all. This is much too late to have any impact on disclosure.

The most hopeful way to inform parents does not appear to be in the form of a formal policy. Rather, society in general needs to be better educated in this area. If couples are in marital or divorce therapy, therapists can assist in this education process. As more research is done in this area, hopefully there will be a trickle-down effect as information becomes available on the internet and in the general media (e.g., talk shows), friends discuss issues over lunch, and family members assist in the process.

### Conclusion

From the results of this study, one may conclude that divorce disclosure is a memorable experience within the divorce process and that it has an effect on children's immediate reactions to divorce. This is important considering that almost all of the participants did not like how they were informed about the divorce. They had clear preferences for how they would have preferred to have been told, and offered many words of advice for parents who are divorcing: things they would do differently than their parents and how they would handle divorce disclosure with their own children. In many ways, the title of this report could have been, "What I wish my parents would have known when they were divorcing."

The findings of this study are exciting and have many implications for future research, policy, and practice. The results are made more significant considering the fact that participants were asked to share their stories. Participants were not limited to



“checking boxes” to describe their experience. Rather, they were able to share their perceptions, reactions, and preferences regarding divorce disclosure in a manner that offered a more complete understanding of that experience. The stories are valuable and should not be overlooked in establishing policy and providing insight for clinical practice. After all, who has more expertise in the most helpful and unhelpful ways to handle divorce disclosure than those who have experienced it?

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## APPENDICES



## Appendix A. Informed Consent

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February 14, 2000

## Informed Consent

### Children's experience of parental divorce disclosure: A look at intrafamilial differences

#### Introduction/Purpose

Professor Thorana Nelson in the Department of Family and Human Development at Utah State University is conducting a research study to find out more about children's perceptions of being told about their parents' divorce. More specifically, the research will be used to compare the experience of siblings. Your participation will aid in gaining insight and understanding to this phenomenon. There will be approximately 15-20 other participants from about 5-7 families.

#### Procedures

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be requested to fill out a demographic questionnaire and also participate in a one hour face-to-face interview. You will be asked questions regarding your perceptions of the divorce disclosure experience, your reactions to the news, and also how you would have preferred to have been told. The interview will be tape recorded.

#### Risks

The subject matter discussed may be sensitive. However, the researchers will make every effort to be sensitive to your feelings and situation.

#### Benefits

There may or may not be any direct benefit to you from the interview. However, the researchers believe that learning more about this experience may assist parents in telling their children about divorce in a way that causes the least amount of distress.

#### Voluntary Nature of Participation/Right to Withdraw

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time. If you experience distress during the interview you may ask to be withdrawn from the study without consequence.

#### Confidentiality

In order to assure confidentiality, you will be assigned a code name and your real name will not appear on any report or written document. The data, reports, and tape recordings will be kept in a locked file, and the tapes will be destroyed after the recordings have been transcribed.



February 14, 2000

### Informed Consent

#### Children's experience of parental divorce disclosure: A look at intrafamilial differences

#### Explanation & Offer to Answer Questions

\_\_\_\_\_ has explained this study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach Professor Nelson at 797-2632.

#### IRB Approval Statement

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this research project.

#### Copy of Consent

You have been given two copies of this Informed Consent. Please sign both copies and retain one copy for your files.

#### Investigator Statement

I certify that the research study has been explained to the individual, by me or my research staff and that the individual understands the nature and purpose, the possible risks and benefits associated with taking part in this research study. Any questions that have been raised, have been answered.

#### Signature of PI & Student

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Dr. Thorana Nelson  
 Principal Investigator  
 753-2632

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Heather Westberg  
 Student Researcher  
 713-6514

#### Signature of Subject

By signing below, I agree to participate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Subject's signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date



Appendix B. Demographic Questionnaire

## Demographic Questionnaire

Children's Experience of Parental Divorce Disclosure:  
 A Look at Intrafamilial Differences  
Questionnaire

It is important for me to understand your background as much as possible. Below are several questions for you to answer that will give me this important information. Please let me know if anything asked here is unclear to you.

Today's Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Gender: M or F (circle)

Where you spent most of your childhood (city & state or country):

\_\_\_\_\_

Birth order in your family: 1st \_\_\_ 2nd \_\_\_ 3rd \_\_\_ 4th \_\_\_ 5th \_\_\_ 6th \_\_\_ 7th \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_

Siblings:

- |    |                 |           |    |        |           |
|----|-----------------|-----------|----|--------|-----------|
| 1. | M or F (circle) | Age _____ | 4. | M or F | Age _____ |
| 2. | M or F          | Age _____ | 5. | M or F | Age _____ |
| 3. | M or F          | Age _____ | 6. | M or F | Age _____ |

Your Education:

Highest grade completed \_\_\_\_\_ (give the number)

College graduate \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Post-graduate degree \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Marital Status (check one):

- married  
 separated  
 divorced  
 widowed  
 single, never married

Children:

M or F (circle)

Age \_\_\_\_\_

M or F

Age \_\_\_\_\_

M or F

Age \_\_\_\_\_

M or F

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Religious preference (denomination): \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your family while growing up? (check one)

- Below blue collar  
 Blue collar  
 Middle class  
 Upper-middle class  
 Upper class

Race/Ethnicity:

- White (Caucasian)  
 Black  
 Hispanic  
 Asian  
 Pacific Islander  
 Native American  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your time.

Appendix C. Interview Protocol

## Interview Protocol

1. What was your family like before your parents got divorced?  
–(Probe/Follow-up) What were your perceptions of marital conflict?
2. When did your parents get divorced?
3. How did you find out that they were getting divorced / separated?
  - Who told you?
  - How did they tell you?
  - Who else was present?
  - Was there an explanation given?
  - Was there any blame placed?
  - Was that the first time you heard about divorce? How suspicious were you?
  - How soon after you found out did parent move out, divorce happen, etc.?
4. What was your reaction to the news?
  - How did you feel?
  - What did you think?
5. What do you recall about your siblings' reactions?
6. Did you discuss with siblings afterwards?
  - How/were you able to support each other?
7. Who did you tell about the news?
8. What was your relationship like with both parents at the time of the disclosure?
9. What was communication like in your family?
  - How open were parents in discussing divorce?



10. How do you perceive the way your parents treated you and your siblings?  
Similarly, differently?
11. What is your most vivid memory from that time in your life, that experience?
12. How would you have preferred to have been told?
13. How would you tell your own child?
14. What do you think people need to know about this issue?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Appendix D. Contact Summary Sheet

