

## THE EXPERIENCES OF DIVORCED MOTHERS AS SINGLE-PARENTS

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**Abstract.** This study explores divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting through in-depth interviews with 5 volunteer divorced mothers drawn from the client-base of the Chatsworth Child and Family Welfare Society. These single-parents are Indian, and divorced with custody of their children. The duration of single-parenthood ranges between 1 and 5 years. A discourse analysis reveals that interviewees' discursive constructions of what it means to be a single-parent are framed within the themes of transition and continuity. The tensions and contradictions between these competing themes play themselves out in terms of the interpretative repertoires of (i) demands and responsibility; (ii) self-nurturance / self-actualisation; and (iii) legitimisation of single-parent status.

### INTRODUCTION.

The phenomenon of the single-parent family has generated considerable social concern and interest within the research community. Rising divorce rates, large and ever-increasing numbers of children being raised in single-parent homes, and the increasing prevalence of female-headed households renders the single-parent family, and the experiences of divorced mothers in particular, a legitimate area for research (Snyman, 1987).

The literature on the single-parent family has been racialised in the sense that the majority of research has been confined to White subjects (Mahabeer, 1989). In response to Snyman's (1987) call for a pressing need for research on single parenthood in groups other than White, this study explores single-parents' experiences in a sample of divorced custodian mothers who are Indian.<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the South African Indian family has been extended in structure. An extended family comprises two or more nuclear families formed by adding the families

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<sup>1</sup> While the research literature typically employs the terms "Indian", "black" and "white", the author recognizes that the categorization of groups on the basis of "culture" / "ethnicity" is inherently problematic. Any apparent reification of cultural differences is unintentional.

of married children (Schoombee & Mantzaris, 1984). The practical implications of an extended family structure are that a different set of social, psychological, and economic relations apply. What distinguishes the Indian extended family from African and Afrikaner extended families is the former's adherence to a unique set of cultural and religious beliefs and practices that are grounded in tradition. However, recent research points toward a significant shift within the Indian community, away from an extended family structure, toward a preference for a nuclear family (Schoombee & Mantzaris, 1984; Mahabeer, 1987). This shift can be understood in terms of changing socio-historical circumstances. Psychological and economic factors have also impinged on and shaped views and preferences regarding family composition.

Research needs to take into account that changing patterns in marriage and divorce in the Indian community relate to the changing structure of the Indian family system (Mahabeer, 1987). Changing patterns of marriage and divorce may be described as follows: There has been an increasing number of female-headed nuclear families in the Indian community; and the reason for single-motherhood has changed from that of "father absence" due to death, to that of "father absence" due to divorce or separation.

While an increasing preference for a nuclear form of family is noted, the historical importance of the extended family system has implications for how we go about researching the phenomenon of the single-parent family in the Indian community. Recent research has, for instance, found the extended family to constitute a legitimate system of social, psychological and often economic support for the single-parent family in general, and for single mothers in particular (Naran, 1991).

Prevailing conceptions of what constitutes adequate parenting hold that the presence of both a mother and a father is a prerequisite for a child's satisfactory and adequate development. Such conceptions, which are confirmed and perpetuated within the realm of developmental psychology, have informed much of the research on single-parent families. Indeed, current research remains biased in its continued use of a deficit model which is underpinned by stereotypical conceptions of what is adequate / inadequate and normal / deviant with respect to parenting (Tuzlak & Hillock, 1988; Olson & Haynes, 1993). In terms of a deficit model, the single-parent family is conceptualised as incomplete and deviant; single-motherhood is viewed as a problem in and of itself.

To date, studies on single-parent families have focussed largely upon the effects of family structure on children.<sup>2</sup> In their review of the research literature, McLanahan and Booth (1989) note that the dominant view in the 1950s and 1960s was that children growing up in single-parent families were at risk for psychopathology. In this regard Tuzlak and Hillock (1988) argue that most researchers start with the *a priori* assumption that divorce has (negatively) disruptive effects on children. Adverse effects of divorce on children and adults alike are often sought, and found. In this way, the view which emphasises one form of family, the intact nuclear family, as most desirable is reinforced and preserved, while the increasing prevalence of single-parent families is viewed as a

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<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that from this point on, all research cited is European/American. This serves as an indication of the paucity of research on single-parenting within the South African context.



deviant phenomenon. It is plausible to conclude that one of the effects of focussing on the negative aspects of single-parent families in the context of research is the perpetuation of negative societal stereotypes (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Olson & Haynes, 1993).

Existing research on single-parent families is characterised by a largely quantitative methodology. How the single-parent family is conceptualised, however, has implications for methodological analysis and the conclusions drawn (Stevenson & Black, 1988; Mahabeer, 1989; McLanahan & Booth, 1989). Conceptualisations of the single-parenting phenomenon have been dominated by an orientation of presumed "father absence". This has led to the limiting and limited tendency for quantitative methodology to relate pathological outcomes in children (for example poor school performance, and susceptibility to substance abuse) to circumstances of "father absence" as a dominant, over-arching research focus.

A central theoretical issue which has methodological implications is the conceptualisation of single-parents as constituting an homogenous group. The failure to distinguish between the different types of single-parent family, and the use of "mixed" samples of divorced, widowed, and never-married single-parents as subjects is inherently problematic. Herzog and Sudia (1973) have argued that many of the differences between single-parent and dual-parent families could be explained by differences in family socio-economic status. Thus, in more recent research, factors other than family structure have been taken into account in attempting to make sense of differences between single-parent and dual-parent families.

While distinguishing between different forms of single-parent families, recent reviews of the literature continue to show that children from mother-only families are disadvantaged. However, these disadvantages are now viewed as outcomes of various factors, including family socio-economic status and adjustment of the custodian parent.

McLanahan and Booth (1989) maintain that studies of the effects of single-parenting on children have improved since the early 1980s. Large, nationally representative, longitudinal surveys have been employed to examine the long-term consequences of single parenthood on children. It is encouraging that researchers are increasingly finding that the reported adverse effects of single parenthood are not as widespread or as devastating as was previously assumed. Indeed, much of the existing evidence is contradictory (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Olson & Haynes, 1993). Clearly, the blanket assumption that the single-parent family has generally adverse and long-lasting effects on all children is not justified.

Despite what might appear to be an improved efficacy in methodological terms, research on single-parent families continues to be biased in its tendency toward a deficit model, investigating "what's wrong with single-parent families?". Some researchers, however, have adopted an alternative, competence model of single (mother-present) parenting. This model hopes to challenge the established frame of investigating "father absence" and its taken-for-granted negative causative effects on children's development. Barry's (1979) study of single-parents who believed they were "successful" is a case in point. The following major conclusions were drawn on the basis of the results of this study: (1) single-parenting provides a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment; (2) the time needed for readjustment ranges from one to two

years; (3) parents and children manage well in various custody arrangements; (4) beyond survival needs, money is not a variable related to feelings of success; and (5) no single factor is responsible for the family's success. Another significant study that adopted a competence model of single-parenting was Atlas's (1981) large-scale survey of single-parents and their children. This study revealed that a large proportion of the single-parent families were well adjusted. Two factors supported the adjustment of these families: (1) continued involvement of the non-custodian parent, and (2) employment of the custodian parent.

Of particular relevance for the present research undertaking is Olson and Haynes' (1993) qualitative study of successful single-parents. The phenomenon of single-parenting was explored through in-depth interviews with 26 single-parents who were classified as "successful" by qualified professionals. The following themes for successful single parenthood emerged: (1) acceptance of responsibilities and challenges of single parenthood; (2) prioritization of the parental role; (3) consistent, non-punitive discipline; (4) emphasis on open communication; (5) ability to foster individuality within a supportive family unit; (6) recognition of the need for self-nurturance; and (7) dedication to rituals and traditions.

Following Olson and Haynes' (1993) line of investigation, the present study assumes an orientation of "mother presence". The focus of attention is on the ways in which divorced mothers parent, and how they *interpret* and *understand* what they are doing as single-parents. In adopting a competence model, an attempt is made to investigate the strengths and positive aspects of single-parenting, without obscuring its associated difficulties.

## METHODOLOGY.

This study attempts to overcome some of the methodological limitations identified earlier as characteristic of the largely quantitative orientation of existing research. It is consistent with the shift, at a broader level, away from the conceptualisation of the single-parent family as atypical or pathogenic. The predominant emphasis on "father absence" and the "deficit model" is rejected in favour of a framework that is oriented toward exploring the competing alternative of discourses around "mother presence". Given that this study attempts to explore the often inconsistent and contradictory ways in which divorced mothers experience single-parenting, a qualitative approach to methodology is adopted.

In the context of qualitative research, both the researcher and the researched are viewed as collaborators in the joint construction of knowledge. Research is seen as "an elaboration of mutual agendas" where there is a shift in focus from attempting to do research "on" people, to attempting to do research "with" people (Burman, 1994).

In the interviews, the divorced mother engaged in an active process of constructing the subjective realities of single-parenting (cf. Thompson, 1989). "An active process" indicates that experiences are not prior to the telling. It is in the context of the interview, in the telling, that experiences are formed and articulated. The stance taken here is informed by Wetherell's (1986) view that language is not a neutral reflection or representation of reality, rather it is *constitutive* of that experience. The term "construction" indicates that meaning is on the one hand not pre-given, and on the



other hand, that it is an active, ongoing social process. Meaning is created actively as interviewees tell about their experiences as single-parents.

Following Sampson (1993), I suggest that as single-parents, divorced mothers have been denied their own voice in establishing the conditions of their lives, and in determining their own identity and subjectivity. What it means to be denied voice is explained by Gergen (1989:73): "Given a range of competing constructions [in this context those of "father absence", and "mother presence"], and sufficient stakes in the outcomes, there may be brisk competition over whose voice is honoured. Whose voice prevails in the sea of alternatives may be critical to the fate of the person, relationships, family life, the community, and in a significant sense to the future of humankind."

Gergen raises the question of relations of power as inherent in whose voice is heard. The devalued, marginalised and subordinate status of single mothers within a patriarchal society has not been challenged by the existing quantitative research. This study addresses this imbalance in existing research by providing interviewees with an arena within which to simultaneously construct, articulate and take stock of their lives as single-parents; to assert voice. "Malestream" research has tended to construct subjectivity and contradiction as stereotypically "feminine", and therefore weak / devalued features (Hollway, 1989). In addition to emphasizing (giving voice to) women's experiences, the celebration of subjectivity and contradiction as fundamental to an understanding of divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting further identifies this study as a feminist project.

#### **A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS APPROACH.**

The distinctive feature of a discourse analysis approach is the primacy of language and text (written or spoken) as the site for investigating social psychological issues (Hollway, 1989). Such an approach rests on the premise that "the social and psychological significance of images cannot be sought in the personality behind the text which produces or reads it, but in the analysis of the language itself" (Furman, 1980 cited in Wetherell, 1986). As used here, discourse analysis is a functionally orientated approach to the analysis of talk and text (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

A discourse analysis approach addresses (and attempts to overcome) the tendency to treat all single-parents as an homogenous group in the context of research. Variation and contradiction in divorced mothers' constructions of their experience is emphasised, as opposed to being glossed over and summarised as aggregate information. This allows for a consideration of single-parents, not as a stereotypic and homogenous group, but as individuals who have differing versions and experiences of single-parenting.

Variation in accounts is probably the single most important analytic principle in doing discourse analysis, revealing the situated and functional character of versions (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1994). Attention to variation operates on different levels. At one level, the analyst's attention is focussed on variations within the talk of an individual speaker, drawing on contradictions and ambiguities in experience. At another level, variation across (different) individuals' versions of their experiences is relevant. Contradictions, tensions and ambiguities in experience are rendered significant by the focus on discourse. It is here, in the discourse itself, that psychological issues are constructed and deployed, and it is in this process of

construction that part of the interest of discourse analysis lies (Edwards & Potter, 1992).

### **Data collection.**

Access to the 5 Indian divorced mothers who constitute the sample was gained by approaching the Chatsworth Child and Family Welfare Society with a request for volunteers who were willing to participate in a psychology research project on divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting. The number of years for which the participants had been single-parents ranged between 1 and 5 years. At the outset, volunteers were informed that relevant personal details would be altered in the research report in order to ensure anonymity. They would receive feedback of the research findings in return for their participation in this study.

The nature of divorced mothers' experiences as single-parents warranted the use of multiple qualitative in-depth interviews. This allowed for the divorced mother and myself as interviewer-researcher to reflect upon and ponder issues raised in the interview context (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Yow, 1994). Such reflection made it possible for me to pick up on past points in order to make connections, see gaps and inconsistencies, avoid asking some questions or rephrasing others, and raise issues for elaboration and clarification in follow-up interviews.

Each interview was between 45 minutes and an hour in length, and was conducted with the participants in their homes on an individual basis. On average, two interviews were conducted with each divorced mother (Appendix A consists of guidelines of issues raised during interviewing). The interviews were taped with the participants' knowledge and consent.

What was highlighted in the process of my interviewing divorced mothers is the primacy of the interview as a relationship (Finch, 1984; Kohler Riessman, 1987; Jorgenson, 1991). The tone of the interviews suggested that giving voice to what it means to be a single-parent was (still) a very painful experience for the participants. At the outset, participants were assured that they were in charge of their own degree of disclosure. They were not obligated to answer all questions or comment or continue talking about issues that became uncomfortable for them. Sensitivity and empathy on my part as the interviewer-researcher was important. Silence often assisted the interviewee to talk through difficult, emotional issues.

### **Data analysis.**

A discourse approach does not prescribe a fixed set of rules for analysis. There is no "recipe" for doing discourse analysis. However, the stance provides some guidelines on how one might proceed (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988).

The text was turned into written form by selectively transcribing the taped interviews. In the extracts, names have been changed to ensure the participants' anonymity. Regarding idiosyncratic features, the utterance "er" in an extract denotes hesitation on the part of the interviewee. Instances where an ellipsis (...) is present in an extract indicates a pause in the interviewee's talk. Capital letters indicate words that were spoken louder and with emphasis.



The transcription process was followed by an explication of the data, informed by the analytical principles outlined by Potter and Wetherell's (1987) discourse analysis approach. Only the initial phase of Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach (i.e., the search for pattern in the data) was carried out. Recurrent patterns in the linguistic constructions - referred to here as interpretative repertoires - were identified by reading and rereading the transcripts and taking out instances where there appeared to be terms, phrases or metaphors linked to the issue of single-parent status (i.e., what it means for the divorced mother to be a single-parent). Recurrent patterns were identified in terms of both variation and consistency in divorced mothers' accounts. In terms of variation, differences within and between interviewees' accounts were identified. In terms of consistency, shared features in their accounts were noted.

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION.**

The textual evidence presented here indicates that single-parent status (that is, what it means for the divorced mother to be a single-parent) can be understood in terms of the overlapping themes of transition and continuity. The tensions, contradictions and ambiguities between these competing versions of single-parenthood play themselves out in terms of the interpretative repertoires of (i) demands and responsibility; (ii) self-nurturance / self-actualisation; and (iii) legitimisation of single-parent status.

### **Single-parent status: Transition and continuity.**

The participants' constructions of what it means to be single-parents were articulated in terms of transition and continuity. These overarching themes serve to frame the discussion of the interpretative repertoires. At the forefront is the issue of how the transition to single-parent status is experienced. The process of change is not limited to a structural shift away from the norm of the nuclear family to a single-parent family. Qualitative relationships and roles feature as well. Further, the nature of that change is complex precisely because it involves so many continuities and similarities. This tension between continuity and change plays itself out in terms of interviewees' rationale that while married and still part of a dual-parent family they took on much of the responsibility for parenting. In a sense then, they have been single-parents all along. Meena describes this element of continuity in the following terms:

*"Let's say it's er it's a bit difficult at times er but I've learnt to cope. Because even like when I was married I used to do most of the things for the children, like take them to school, take them er shopping, take them for extra classes. But er NOW I think the demand is greater on me."*

Meena's comment goes beyond reflecting a basic element of continuity. She constructs parental responsibilities and demands as greater in quantitative terms. Also, the shift to single-parent status entails changes in terms of how the demands and responsibilities of (single) parenting are experienced. Featuring here is the repertoire of demands and responsibility.

The transition away from the norm of the nuclear family to single-parent status (also) plays itself out in terms of the discursive construction of stigmatisation. This operates in terms of what it means to be divorced on the one hand, and what it means to be a single mother on the other. Such socially-derived meanings are pervasive in the traditionally-oriented Indian community. A potent set of social meanings play a role in

constraining divorced mothers' activities at an individual level. For instance, Devi describes her experiences in these terms:

*"Once, once you're divorced, you're single ... well you're not supposed to go out at all, have fun, let your hair down or be yourself anymore. You have to be a mother all the time ... It's like you don't have a life anymore."*

An important facet of interviewees' experiences as single-parents is their experiences as gendered beings (as women and not just "mothers all the time") within the context of a patriarchal society. The textured and layered nature of human experience is revealed in that divorced mothers define themselves not only as divorced, and as single-parents, but as adults who are entitled to a social life outside of parenting. Devi's comment raises the issue of the tension that exists between societal prescriptions and expectations, and the interviewees' own views.

A careful reading of the transcripts reveals a discursive construction of resistance which operates at two levels. At one level, the divorced mother grapples with the prescriptions and expectations that society has of a particular type of family-form. Silberstein (1988) makes the relevant point that though always changing, the power of ideology lies in its capacity to represent cultural reality as natural. In our society, it is "the nature of" families to consist of children and a dual-parenting unit. The intact nuclear family is valued as normative, thus negating the possibility of the single-parent form being viewed as anything other than atypical and deviant. By virtue of her single-parent status, the divorced mother is constituted as the (devalued, illegitimate) "other". Inherent in this ideological "othering" is a potent set of perceptions, social meanings and value-implications which the interviewees grappled with. Hand in hand with this process of "othering", a set of prescriptions and expectations operate with regard to how the divorced mother is supposed to go about being a single-parent. Thus, the second level to the discursive construction of resistance is the interviewee's resistance to the prescription that she ought to make attending to the demands and responsibilities of (single) parenting her life's work. This is in conflict with the need for self-nurturance, attending to her own interests and ambitions at a personal level. Here, the self-nurturance repertoire is undermined by the repertoire of demands and responsibility.

### **Demands and responsibility for parenting.**

The competing alternative to the predominant constructions (in the research literature) around "father absence" would appear to be those of "mother presence". At the level of demands and responsibility, single-parents acknowledge that they have to be "both mother and father" to their children. The interviewees' accounts indicate, however, that distinctions between "mothering" and "fathering" are, in the final analysis, of limited practical and conceptual use. Rather than drawing an overt distinction between "mothering" and "fathering", it is constructions around "parenting" per se that dominate their accounts. For instance, Devi comments:

*"I think the most important thing is having a sense of values, or knowing things like honesty, caring, truth. All these things are important and it doesn't matter who imparts it, the mother or the father."*



In this context then, "mother presence" is not only synonymous with, but has come to mean "parenting". This has implications for (i) how the divorced mother perceives and interprets her role as a single-parent, (ii) how she articulates the difficulties experienced as a single-parent family, and (iii) how she makes sense of what she is doing as a single-parent.

Divorced mothers tend to perceive and interpret their roles in terms of being solely responsible for parenting. For instance Devi explains what being a single-parent means to her:

*"Well, er it means a lot of responsibility for one thing. I can't just simply opt out of it, and say well, somebody else has to do this or that for me. I have to be the one there all the time."*

Again, when I asked her whether there was anything that she disliked about being a single-parent, Devi made it clear that the issue at hand is not one of whether she likes or dislikes being a single-parent. It is rather the demands and responsibilities of parenting that are significant for her:

*"Er, it's not so much dislike as being plain straightforward DIFFICULT. Because for one thing I have to make sure that I have a roof over our heads. I have to make sure that the children's er needs are being met ... their, their clothes, their fees ... And there's always something cropping up with the boys ... It's something or other. So, ya, it's difficult as far as that is concerned."*

A similar sentiment is reflected in the following comment made by Meena:

*"Er their father doesn't have much contact with them. Neither does he DO anything, or is he prepared to do anything for them. So the ENTIRE responsibility falls on my shoulders. And er it IS taxing and demanding, you know."*

The demands and responsibility repertoire highlights the inconsistent and contradictory nature of participants' experiences of single-parenting. Returning to Meena's comments, she says:

*"And er the other thing is Prakash WAS there for the children. Like if they had to go swimming or something, he used to take them. I don't want to underestimate the man altogether. And er ... But now I find I have to do that. IF they are doing something extra, extra-curricular I've got to do it, but if he was around, he WOULD do it. So er I think in that sense er you know there's more responsibility now, ON ME."*

Here Meena grapples with the loss of the input of her spouse, the "other half" of the nuclear parenting pair, in the shift to a single-parent form of family. On the one hand we have Meena's construction of herself as having been a single-parent all along; she continues to take major responsibility for the demands of single-parenting. Through the disclaimer *"I don't want to underestimate the man altogether"*, however, Meena admits that her spouse did play some role, even if negligible, in parenting. His absence, or rather the absence of his input into parenting, means that there is a qualitative change in terms of how Meena experiences the demands and responsibilities of parenting. As

Meena's competing versions indicate, interviewees tend to live (and articulate) these multiple, contradictory experiences in quite comfortable ways.

### **Self-nurturance / self-actualisation.**

The self-nurturance repertoire brings to the fore single-parents' striving toward growth, completeness and fulfilment. An increased sense of autonomy forms yet another facet of the shift away from the norm of the nuclear family to a single-parent form. Interviewees have learnt to do practical things such as handle financial matters for themselves. Devi describes such a development in the following terms:

*"On the positive side I've actually had to learn a lot about myself, my resources, my inner resources, in other words, you know, my coping abilities and things like that. I've actually had to er things like I never knew much about money, about handling money. Er things like that, especially that I didn't know. I never had to worry about things like paying the rent and the lights. I never had to do all that but now I'm like thrown totally into it (Laughs). I find myself juggling finances and trying to work things out and finding out things about going to the bank, loans, all those kind of things which I had never done before."*

Constructed in largely positive terms, such changes contribute to the interviewee's sense of self-efficacy and competence as a parent. In this way, the divorced mother's sense of self, and her understanding of what it means to be a single-parent is shaped by the transition from a nuclear family to single-parent status.

Against the backdrop of being solely responsible for parenting, divorced mothers prioritise their parental role. They also recognise the need to attend to their goals and interests as individuals. Recognition need not necessarily imply action however, for the divorced mother might choose not to act on the need to nurture herself at a personal level, given the constraints of her parenting situation. A tension between participants' experiences of themselves as individuals with their own interests and ambitions, and their responsibilities as single-parents is constructed discursively as frustration. For example, Devi says:

*"And all you want to do sometimes is just to just go out, to let our hair down, to be with people your own age and just have a good time, enjoy yourself ... Just forget about everything, but you can't do that."*

The tension between the self-nurturance, and demands and responsibility repertoires brings an important contextual factor to the fore. The point raised earlier is that divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting are shaped by their positioning as gendered beings, as women and not only mothers, in a patriarchal society. Feelings of frustration and a sense of being constrained by the demands and responsibilities of being a single-parent tend to prevail. This conflict is exacerbated in the case of single mothers who are employed. In response to my question "Do you think that you get enough time for yourself, being a single-parent and a working mother?" Meena says:

*"No, I don't have time for myself. I'll be very honest with you. My children don't get taken away by their father every fortnightly. Er there isn't a DAY in a WEEK of a MONTH that he takes them even for an hour. He's never 'phoned to say 'Can I take them to the movies?'. So I DON'T have much time for myself."*



Interviewees experience a conflict between what they can and cannot do, given the demands and responsibilities of their particular (single) parenting situation. Women whose families take on a nuclear form have spouses who can take their children to the movies on occasion for instance, enabling them to have time to themselves. Divorced mothers are not afforded this luxury. What comes into play is the interviewee's sense of being constrained by her particular parenting circumstances. The lack of time for nurturing her own needs and interests is constructed as problematic. Here, the demands and responsibility, and self-nurturance repertoires work to undermine each other.

Becoming more competent and confident in other aspects of her functioning (work and studying, for example) feeds into the divorced mother's sense of competence and self-efficacy in her role as a single-parent. Applying his resilience concept to the issue at hand, Rutter (1995) maintains that success in one arena gives divorced mothers feelings of self-efficacy such that it will make them confident to take positive steps in other areas of their lives. For interviewees, activities that are not directly related to parenting (for example studying, and achieving at work) serve as important sources of self-nurturance. Devi, a teacher, comments on the importance of studying:

*"Actually I think studying has been a MAJOR outlet for me. You know like er the fact that I have to sit down and put my mind to something meant that I had no time to feel sorry for myself and it's actually been very special because every time you pass an exam its great. You know you've done well and you feel good about it. And so it has a way of of bolstering up your, your self-confidence. And you feel like you don't really need to ... you don't ... I don't have time to ... There are times when I rant and rave : 'Why the hell did this have to happen?'... (Laughs). So it's been like a very good thing. Studying has, has been the BEST thing that could happen to me ever."*

Employment, too, features as a positive dimension in the lives of single-parents. Interviewees construct their present occupations as much needed sources of income. Being employed means that they are actively involved in supporting their families financially. Furthermore, this is a facet of the interviewee's life that is in many ways divorced from her demands and responsibilities as a single-parent. The interaction with other adults which a work situation provides means that divorced mothers can have a sense of not having to be "a Mom all the time". Aspects of self other than the interviewee's devalued status as a single-parent and divorced mother are warranted in the work situation. Thus, like studying, being employed facilitates self-actualisation.

### **Legitimation of single-parent status.**

There is a tendency for single-parents to challenge the ideology of the nuclear family as the normative and therefore only legitimate form of family. Interviewees make quite explicit claims to normality, challenging the stereotype "single-parent family equals abnormality / deviance" through a discursive legitimation of single-parent status. One of the ways in which this legitimation strategy works is by single-parents comparing their current situation to their previous experiences as part of a two-parent family. Participants expressed feelings of being more competent as single-parents than when they were in a two-parent unit, even though this entails sole responsibility for the demands of parenting. They made claims to being "better off single". For example,

when I asked her whether there was anything that she liked about being a single-parent, Seetha said:

*"You know NOW I really enjoy it because I come from work, I don't have a dominating man, you know, that has to push me around. I'm free. And er Divya and I can go where we want to. I could do what I like, you know. There's nobody to restrict me in that way."*

Meena expresses similar sentiments:

*"It's that sense of knowing, you know, that this is YOUR domain. And nobody's going to TELL YOU what to do in it. Nobody's going to hurl abuses at you. Nobody's going to insult or embarrass you ... Because I was just sick and tired of being abused and insulted by him, I couldn't take it anymore. And now not to have to live with that, I, I, think it's great."*

The inconsistent, contradictory nature of the interviewees' experience is reflected in the reliance on conflicting themes that undermine the repertoire of legitimation. One of the ways in which the tension between the self-nurturance, and demands and responsibility repertoires operates is as follows: In the interviewee's evaluations, a positive aspect to single-parent status is that it releases her, both physically and emotionally, from the bounds of an unhappy marriage. Her status as a single-parent is honoured as valid and legitimate because it provides the divorced mother with an opportunity to be a better parent to her children. Here the self-nurturance repertoire works to resist the stereotype of deviance; in the absence of an unsupportive spouse, interviewees have become, in their personal capacities, more effective parents. At the same time however, the conflicting repertoire of demands and responsibility reveals that though "free" in certain respects, the divorced mother is still bound to being solely responsible for the demands of (single) parenting. The demands and responsibilities of single-parenting are qualitatively different from those within the normative intact nuclear family. Thus, notions of abnormality / deviance are reinforced, and divorced mothers' claims to normality are rendered invalid. In this way, the demands and responsibility repertoire works to undermine the legitimation of single-parent status.

As another strategy in their claims to normality, divorced mothers compare their functioning as a single-parent family to conflict-ridden intact families. For example Seetha says:

*"I've felt now I've won the battle. And now I've got a lot to live for and look forward to. But I, I personally feel that if there are two (people) that are living, and if they go on fighting, and if the children had to witness this, you know, that the Mum is being abused ... I feel it's right that they be separated because if you look at it, what happens to the kid?"*

Also in this regard, Devi comments:

*"I know there are times when I wonder ... oh, should I actually have stuck with it? Should I have actually hung in there for the sake of the children? And then I think to myself if I did that, I probably would have died, you know. It's er I don't think people could be like er people fighting and fighting and killing each other and carry on in this way ... And I don't think the children would learn anything from it either."*



In establishing single-parent status as legitimate, the self-nurturance, and demands and responsibility repertoires are once again called into play. Parents staying together "for the sake of the children" is another discursive element which works to undermine that of an individual right to self-actualisation. Interviewees' comments indicate a resistance to the prescriptive ideal of staying together "for the sake of the children". Their sentiments are consistent with evidence in support of the theory that "children of divorce do better than do children in conflict-ridden intact families" (White & Woollett, 1992). Together with their evaluations around being "better off single", divorced mothers' accounts indicate a parenting goal of being able to give their children what those from dual-parenting families have, in material terms. Another parenting goal is that of providing their children with the same love and attention that others are getting. In response to my question: "Is there anything that you find difficult about being a single-parent?" Maya says:

*"I have to give him, try to give him er everything that he wants, you know. Everything that other children have, now I have to try and give him that and just look after him."*

Of course, such parenting goals are not confined to discursive constructions. In the broader context of their daily lives, divorced mothers make maximal use of their resources and abilities in attempts to provide for their children as best as they can. The interviewee compares what she can offer her children as a single-parent, with what children within an intact nuclear family would have. This indicates that the ideology of the nuclear family does not cease to operate; the divorced mother tries to compensate for "father absence". By virtue of her parenting goals, and her use of sources of support such as the extended family (and male role models in particular), the divorced mother attempts to keep her family nuclear in a sense. This is evident in the following comment by Devi:

*"Well, a normal family, er I think the only difference is there's no man around my house ... And er other than that I think we're quite normal. And er my Dad's always around. People might say that's not the same ... But er my ex-husband didn't do much for me when I was married, so I can't see how that would've helped even having him around here. He was merely a burden in my life, you know. So I think ... I... we are quite normal."*

Parker's (1992) approach is regarded as useful for the analysis of divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting because it accords due precedence to the role of institutions, power and ideology. Of particular relevance here are two of the criteria which Parker (1992) proposes in his method of discourse analysis, namely that discourses have ideological effects, and that they support institutions. Firstly, there is the point that discourses have ideological effects. At one level, the discursive legitimisation of single-parent status resists the ideology of the nuclear family as normative and the preferred ideal. Yet by continuing to use the nuclear family as a referential base from which to make evaluations about their own families, interviewees also produce and reproduce the ideology of the nuclear family as normative and the single-parent family as deviant and invalid. The second point is that discourses support institutions. At one level, the repertoire of legitimisation promotes the notion of the single-parent family as valid in and of itself. Yet, by virtue of modelling their families on the nuclear family, divorced mothers undermine their discursive constructions of the single-

parent family as legitimate. In this way they lend support to the institution of the family as nuclear in composition.

## CONCLUSION.

This attempt to make sense of how divorced mothers interpret and understand what they are doing as single parents has been informed by the analytic principles outlined in Potter and Wetherell's (1987) approach to discourse analysis. Thus, the account produced (and presented here) is a strongly positioned and therefore incomplete one. All findings are constructed, and thus open to change, reconstruction and reinterpretation.

In addressing the imbalance in extant research on the single-parent family, this study has explored the competing alternative to discourses of "father absence", namely those of "mother presence". A relevant finding here is that participants' accounts are dominated by constructions around "parenting" (rather than "mothering"). An overt distinction between "mothering" and "fathering" has shown itself to be, in the final analysis, of limited practical and conceptual use. Further, a positioned reading of participants' accounts revealed that the psychological significance of what it means to be a single-parent is constructed out of the competing themes of transition and continuity. Within this frame the interpretative repertoires of demands and responsibility, self-nurturance / self-actualisation, and legitimisation of single-parent status have been explored. These issues are identified as central to an understanding of what it means for the divorced mother to be a single-parent. It is argued that there is a necessity for researchers to engage with the issues explored in this study as a precondition to researching adjustment, coping and support with respect to the phenomenon of single-parenting.

Burman & Parker (1993) argue that a focus on reflexivity constitutes one of the key moral / political consequences of "doing" discourse analysis. Heightened attention is given to imbalanced power relations in research. Tindall (1994:154) maintains that "the power imbalance between researcher and researched remains, despite the use of democratising practices and the efforts of the researcher to disown and shrug off the role of the expert". Indeed, it is the researcher who is firmly positioned by participants as knowledgeable, who sets the process in motion, who decides on the initial research issue and which frameworks to use.

This study has presented an explicitly "psychologised" account of divorced mothers' experiences of single-parenting. In addition to my "positioning" within the discipline of psychology, my accounts of divorced mothers' versions of single-parenting are structured by and always already embedded within the overlapping discourses of what it means to be a woman (that is, a gendered subject), and a feminist. Here too, the imbalance in relations of power in research is evident. Despite my well-intentioned claims of giving voice to participants' experiences, I occupy the privileged position of controlling what voice of the participants is heard, choosing extracts, shaping how the data is analysed, what conclusions are drawn, and what happens to the final product. In the final analysis it is the researcher's version of reality that is given public visibility (Tindall, 1994).



#### **Note.**

The author would like to thank Kevin Durrheim and Lindy Wilbraham, the **PINS** editors, for the generosity of their time in commenting on an earlier draft of this article.

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#### **Appendix 1: Broad guideline of topics / issues raised in interviews.**

Following Burman (1994), the interview schedule consisted of a list of topic areas (posed in the form of questions), with specific issues to be raised in the interviews. Questions were asked in an open-ended manner and usually took the form, "tell me about ..." and "describe ...".

- \* Duration of single-parenthood.  
For how long have you been a single-parent?
- \* Describe what being a single-parent is like for you?  
What does being a single-parent mean to you?
- \* Tell me about some of the things that you like about single-parenting?
- \* What can you tell me about your children? (Number; How old were they at the time of becoming a single-parent family?; ages at present; concerns about them.)
- \* Tell me about some of the things that you dislike about single-parenting?
- \* Describe what you do when you're worried or concerned about your children?
- \* Relationships with others, and support.  
Whom can you rely on for emotional support?
- \* Describe your daily routine in maintaining a household?  
Assistance with household chores?
- \* Tell me about your family's living arrangements?  
Is this the home that you lived in prior to your divorce?
- \* How does single-parenthood compare to being a two-parent family. I'm interested to know whether over time, you have changed in the way that you've been a single-parent? Explore issues of competency regarding parental role.
- \* What do you most enjoy about being a single-parent?
- \* How do you experience responsibility for raising your children?  
What does this mean to you?

- Relationships with children.  
Would you describe your relationship with each of your children?
- What do you find most difficult about being a single-parent?  
Tell me about whether there is anyone that you can talk to about your concerns?
- Circumstances surrounding the divorce, and others' reactions.  
How did everyone react when you were divorced?  
Whom did you get the most support from?
- Employment.  
Were you employed prior to your divorce?  
Are you employed at the moment?  
Tell me a bit about your job? (For how long have you been working as a \_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_? A full-time job? Hours of work?)
- How do you experience being both a working mother and a single-parent?  
Do you receive maintenance?  
Whom can you rely on to assist you financially?
- Attempts at coping.  
In what ways do you try to cope with the challenges of being a single-parent?  
Do you feel that you get enough time for yourself? What do you do to relax?
- Is there anything else about being a single-parent that you would like to discuss?