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Through the Eyes of the Child

**A Study of Children's Experiences at the Time Their Parents Separate:
What Happens in These Children's Lives Seen from Their Own Point of View.**

Author: Rannveig Guðmundsdóttir
Supervisor: Maria Hjortsjö

Abstract

The main purpose of this study is to form a picture of what happens in a child's life when their parents separate and how this event is seen through the child's eyes.

This study is based on qualitative research methods in which eleven children from six families were interviewed. In addition, the parents were asked a few questions about their custody arrangements and the amount of the cooperation between the two parents. These questions were asked in an attempt to create a picture of the children's environment today.

The analysis in this study is based on Mead's theory on symbolic interaction. Other theories on children were also included. Furthermore, the children were viewed from their place in society and their legal rights.

The emotional experiences of the children ranged from anger, grief, sadness, and fear to relief but they also experienced unity, friendship, sympathy, and love.

Overall the children shared one common feeling. They all experienced the feeling of powerlessness in an adult world as well as the wish that their parents could remain friends in spite of the divorce.

The main result of this study was that the children were not prepared for the news of the separation and stood alone during the divorce process. The child does not have a legal right for support during this period in life.

Keywords: Social work, divorce, perception, coping, loyalty, symbolic interactionism, powerlessness, children.

Foreword

I would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone that made it possible for me to finish this project. First, I would like to mention my colleagues at the Church's Family Center (Fjölskylduþjónusta Kirkjunnar) who took on more responsibilities at work so I could focus on this project, especially towards the end. Next, I would like to share my gratitude with the ministers who assisted with the sampling. I would like to thank my good colleague Svava Stefánsdóttir, MSW, for her enthusiasm and support during the whole process. Cynthia Lisa Jeans, CSW, is thanked for her help with the English and my supervisor in Sweden, Maria Hjortsjö, is heart fully thanked for her good and helpful guidance.

I would like to mention that my husband, sons, daughter-in-laws and grandchildren have taught me more than all my academic knowledge put together; i.e. that the most important thing in life is to have a caring and loving family.

Last, but not least, I would like to thank the children and their parents for participating in this study. Without them, the project would have never become a reality.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

For many years, as a social worker and family therapist, I have gained knowledge and experience through my contact with many families. In other words I gained knowledge of human interaction and how people solve disagreements or other life issues. This also includes the disappointment and sorrow families experience when their family life does not proceed as expected. Those families I met have had to deal with a variety of problems or issues in their lives. The issues that they brought with them to counseling had varying effects on each of their lives. In my practice, I noticed the difficulty some couples have in developing concrete, sound and intimate relationships on the one hand and with taking the responsibility of being a parent on the other. In our complicated modern society, where everything is happening so fast and changing so quickly, it seems overwhelming to maintain a good relationship. Many couples simply cannot manage to stay together.

In Iceland, as in other European countries, divorce and separations have increased considerably since the middle of the last century. In Iceland, it is considerably difficult to get exact information about the extent and frequency of parental separations because of the large number of couples who co-habit and are not married; many of these couples are not formally registered.

The Statistical Yearbook of Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands) shows only statistics on separations and divorces. It is remarkable that the increase in separations was highest from 1960 to 1975. Since then, it has remained almost constant over the last twenty-five years (Landshagir, 2002, p.61). However, as I mentioned above, this statistic only offers information about those couples who had been married.

Similar to other Scandinavian countries, the frequency of marriage is rather low in Iceland, but has been increasing over the last ten years. Couples are often co-habiting for many years and having children before they enter into marriage (or as in some cases, never intend to). A large number of these couples separate at some point, but we are unable to measure precisely to what extent this occurs. In spite of the inaccuracy of the statistics, it nevertheless remains a fact that the intention to create a family and stay together in good times as in bad does not always hold water. The lack of statistics awakens the question of how the children of co-habiting parents weather a separation. These families go unnoticed by both the statistics bureau and the clergy, since priests are only mandated by law to intervene in the divorce process; issuing a letter of mediation only once the married couple have attended a meeting with the priest.

In this thesis, we will examine how children experience the course of events leading up to and following the divorce of their parents. I have often wondered what effect divorce has on Icelandic children and teenagers and how these children cope. I am hoping that by increasing knowledge in this area, within the Icelandic community, might lead towards better preparation if or when divorce becomes unavoidable

The focus will be primarily on the children. I will attempt to look into the child's world (as they remember it) at the moment when their parents decide that they are no longer able to live together anymore under the same roof.

1.2 The Environment in which the Problem Presents

The problem occurs during the act of divorce and its consequences. The perspective is from the child. This coincides to their position in society, their position within the family and their opportunities to influence the situation.

It is helpful to consider what elements could cause a family, constructed by two individuals in good faith, to fail. Most cultures throughout the world, especially in the West have radically changed since the middle of the previous century; including Iceland, a small island in the North Atlantic with only about 300,000 inhabitants. Today we speak of a global community and globalism, ideas that were almost unknown two decades ago. Discussions center often on how fast society has changed. We really do not have the time to stop and question which path we have taken, where it is taking us or what ideals our life is based on. The family is more or less separated all day – the parents work separate jobs, the children attend daycare or school and each individual has their own separate hobbies or recreation. Can such an environment support a cohesive family? Is it possible that the bonds between family members will become superficial; creating a lack of emotional contact? Do the new social changes, which demand career success, cause people to be unable to have one spouse (unable to create a lasting bond) or does the explanation lie within human behavior; i.e. the direction in which humans have evolved both in regards to personality and behavior? In addition, we must consider the fact that people live much longer today than they did a century ago; allowing for a biological explanation for why some individuals have more than one spouse over their lifetime.

Speculation of social phenomena has followed humanity throughout the ages and it is difficult to find an absolute answer or explanation. Scientists and researchers, on the other hand are interested in searching for causes in an attempt to find answers and explain social phenomena. Some try to find explanations within the individual; i.e. in his thought process and behavior, while others seek explanations within the system or its framework (i.e. institutes) where the individual is. I believe it is important to include both perspectives when writing about human experiences. One view does not denote the other. As soon as reactions, behavior and thought processes are examined; the individual's environment or social boundaries cannot be forgotten.

1.3 The Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to form a picture of what happens in a child's life when their parents separate. In order to focus on one particular aspect I decided to look at what children see and experience when their parents tell them they will no longer be living together. What does it look like through their eyes? In adjunction, I continued to view the process from their perspective in order to understand how they got through it and what affect they say it had on them. This would allow an opportunity to see if present resources and support for divorcing families were doing their jobs or if they needed to be improved; keeping the needs of the child in focus.

It is important to gather all necessary elements in order to get a picture of a phenomena or an event and, like in a puzzle, put it together in hopes of seeing it as a whole. This was kept in mind during the research process, trying to grasp those things I thought the children found important. The elements of main interest are the following:

1. How the children were told about the divorce (or more importantly, how the children heard the news)

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2. The children's reactions in the beginning and then later
3. The children's perceptions (thoughts and feelings)
4. How the children coped

Keeping these points in mind, I was hoping to form a picture of how the children experience being told such serious news, how children act under these circumstances and what they thought or felt. Additionally, what kind of support do they get and from whom? How are they coping and how do they experience these changes in their life? I also remained open to other factors that the children brought up even though they could not be classified under the four headings above.

1.4 Preconception (sw. förförståelse)

These questions began to form in my head when I would sit in sessions with parents that were contemplating divorce or one or even both individuals had decided to divorce. I also noticed that once parents made the decision to divorce, they often postponed telling the children. The parents often worried about this and wanted to wait for the right moment. Sometimes I felt as if the parents were trying to protect the children by not involving them in this problem; a problem they felt they solely owned and was not their children's business. I pictured the child alone in its world, sometimes unaware of the shadow cast over them, that a radical change was just around the corner and they had no choice in it. In fact, it has been my experience that most children were not told about the divorce until the day that one of the parents moved out (usually the father).

During 1996 - 1999, I worked at Samvist, which was a family therapy center for families with children. This was a collaborative experimental project between two municipalities, which was later disbanded because the municipalities found it to be too expensive in spite research showing favorable results. The staff was given the opportunity to focus more on children than previously, especially when it came to divorce or separation. The staff thought it was important to give the children an opportunity to talk without the parents being present, thus being able to relay their wishes or concerns to the parents. This approach was very successful and many parents commented on how their children improved emotionally.

What was most interesting was that the child's account varied from that of the parents. The parents' view of their children were often clouded by their own discomfort and worries about changes they were about to face or even clouded by their wish that everything would go well, especially when they believed that the divorce was best for the children. Often the one child, which the parents were least worried about, needed the most assistance or was most unhappy with the divorce. This awakened questions about the importance of children's voices being heard in such dramatic situations such as their parents' separation.

2 Method and Selection

2.1 Method

The decision was made to interview children between the ages of 12 and 18 and the method chosen is qualitative, which seems most appropriate for this study. Data was collected from a qualitative interview, which is defined as, “An interview whose purpose is to abstract a description of the individuals experiences based on qualitative interpretations of the phenomena described” (Kvale, 1979, p. 163). Thus, knowledge is created from the interview. In other words, one could view the researcher and participant as if they were on an expedition. Qualitative research methods focus on how we experience life and our environment, why we act the way we do and how we communicate with others. We are interested in understanding and characterizing, but are not interested in calculating or finding proof (Meeuwisse, 2001).

This approach in research methods offers closeness to the subject, so it is very important to consider the ethical principles surrounding the study. For this reason, I thought it was important for a required minimum amount of time (i.e. two to three years) to have passed from the date of the divorce before an interview should be taken. The reason for this prerequisite was that a certain amount of balance should have resumed in the child’s life following the upheaval that the divorce probably caused. Also, it is possible to assume that a child might be experiencing a crisis during the divorce of their parents and to participate in a research project at that junction could increase the child’s suffering, which would by no means be ethically acceptable. In consideration of the participants’ age, it was considered necessary for the children to have reached a certain level of maturity and have the ability to express themselves in an interview atmosphere verbally.

In addition to speaking with the children, I planned to speak with the parents briefly over the telephone about conditions of the custody and their cooperation in their parental role. It is hoped that these conversations would offer important background information, which could shed light on the condition of the child’s life today. The guide intended for the interview questions for both the children and their parents are shown in Appendix C – Interview Guidance and Appendix D - Survey.

2.2 The Starting Point

At first, it was necessary to explore whether authorization would be needed to conduct this study. The Icelandic Committee on Personal Rights (Persónuvernd) recommended that a study of this nature be reported, but authorization is not required. In Iceland, regulations on authorization are very stringent for research studies that touch people’s lives on a personal level. Especially when conducting a quantitative research project or using questionnaires. When utilizing qualitative research methods and when participants are contacted via a gatekeeper, is it necessary to report the study to the committee.¹

¹Persónuvernd home page:
<http://www.personuvernd.is/tolvunefnd.nsf/form/tilkynningar.html>.

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Thus, the first step was to report the study to Icelandic Committee on Personal Rights (Persónuvernd). No comments were sent from the committee about the proposal or its methods and so no obstacles stood in the way to continue. The next step was to find the subjects; i.e. find children and teenagers that were willing to participate in the study (under parental consent).

Assistance was given with this step from two Icelandic ministers. A letter was written to them explaining the goal of the study (see Appendix A – Information for Priests). The ministers contacted the parents who had received a letter of mediation and received their permission for me to contact them to discuss their children's participation in the study. The parents were offered written documentation of the study; its goal as well as the questions intended for both the children and parents (see Appendix B – Information for Parents). During phone conversations with parents who wanted to participate in the study, all agreed to receive the letter when they brought the children. Once the parents had given their permission, they spoke to the children and if the children wanted to participate, an appropriate time was set for an interview. The parents also consented to answer a few questions over the phone regarding custody arrangements and the cooperation of both parents when it came to parenting. The ministers supplied a list of eleven divorced couples with 21 children in all. Once the list was cut down to children aged 10-17 there were eleven children left from six families who participated (see section 2.3 under). At the time of the interviews, two to four years had passed since the divorce. Thus, the sample was fairly close to the initial proposal in regards to age and time lapsed since the divorce.

2.3 Selection

One of my jobs is as a therapist and counselor at the Church's Family Services (CFS). At CFS, we work in closely with ministers who refer cases when a need arises within a family for marriage and family counseling or mediation at times when divorce is inevitable.

As stated in the introduction, a couple who is considering divorce is obligated by Icelandic law to obtain a letter of mediation from a minister. The letter of mediation is required before a divorce can be granted. In the letter, the minister states that the couple was unable to achieve a compromise. Thus, ministers keep a record of all couples for whom they have written a letter of mediation. For obvious reasons the assistance of a minister in approaching the subjects for this study seemed more advantageous than approaching those families that had attended CFS.

Thus, a minister was chosen as the gatekeeper, because it was important for the researcher not to have prior knowledge of the subjects and not influence who participated in the study.

An arrangement was made for the minister to contact those couples he or she had given a letter of mediation. The minister would request the parent's permission for the researcher to approach them about the possible participation of their children in a study. The list the minister provided included 11 families, of which five families participated. Another minister, who assisted in the sampling, stated that a fourteen-year-old boy was interested in participating, so he and his twelve-year-old sister were included. Overall, 11 children from six families participated (see table 1). The participating children's year of birth is shown in bold in the table.

Table 1 List of Families Contacted after an Intended Divorce

	Family Structure	Letter of Mediation Given (Year)	Participated in Study
1	Parents with two children born 1989 and 1993	2000	Yes
2	Parents with two children born 1991 and 1992	2000	
3	Parents with two children born 1984 and 1989	2000	
4	Parents with two children born 1988 and 1989	2000	Yes
5	Parents with one child born 1993	2000	
6	Parents with one child born 1991	1999	
7	Parents with one child born 1982	1999	
8	Parents with two children born 1988 and 1993	1999	
9	Parents with one child born 1985	1999	Yes
10	Parents with two children born 1989 and 1996	1999	Yes
11	Parents with three children born 1985 , 1987 , and 1990	1999	Yes
12	Parents with two children born 1989 and 1991	2000	Yes

Families who chose not to participate in the study gave a number of reasons. The basic reasons given are shown in table 2.

Table 2 Reasons Given by Families not Participating in the Study

Family Nr.	Reasons Given for not Participating in the Study
2	The couple reconciled
3	The mother tried to get the children to participate, but they did not want to
5	Both the child's father and the researcher agreed that the child was too young to participate
6	The mother was against the child's participation in the study
7	The child had moved away from home and was outside the targeted age range
8	The couple reconciled after a year separation. The mother was supportive of the study and wanted her children to participate. The researcher decided not to include them

2.3.1 The Questionnaire for the Parents

As stated before it seemed beneficial to ask the parents a few questions about their custody arrangement, visitation and cooperation. The reason for these questions was to obtain basic information about the divorce process; and how communication and/or cooperation developed after the divorce in order to examine the circumstances and each child's well-being in light of these three factors. The phone calls to the parents

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were conducted at the same time as interviews were conducted with the children; i.e. the fall 2002. Two fathers did not participate, because one father lives abroad and in one case the mother had sole custody and did not want the father to be contacted. It seemed appropriate to honor her request. The parents' answers were transcribed at the same time they were spoken to.

2.3.2 Description of the Sample

The study examines the results of interviews conducted with 11 children, as well as their parents' answers. A strategic sample was collected and I utilized the help of a gatekeeper in contacting participants as stated earlier. Anna Meeuwisse (2001) has discussed the various ways available to approach participants in a qualitative study. She says that one should try to speak to those individuals or groups that represent the *extreme*. Another approach is *maximal variation* in which you try to choose individuals or groups that are as dissimilar to each other as possible. Furthermore, it is possible to select a small-homogenized group (Meeuwisse, 2001). This sample lies somewhere between these last two mentioned approaches. The children vary in age and gender, but all have experienced the divorce of their parents including siblings from the same family. Furthermore, the time-lapse since the divorce varies from family to family, the shortest period being two years and the longest four. The participants consisted of six girls aged 10-17 and five boys aged 12-17. The participants will be introduced in chapter 4.

2.4 Mode of Procedure

The interviews were conducted in October and November 2002. In three families, the children visited the office, but in three other families, they were visited at their home. Originally all interviews were to be conducted at the office, but the parents' busy schedule in two families was an obstacle so the children were visited at home. Additionally, one family lived so far away that it would have been too costly for the family to come to the office so they were also visited at the family's house. In one instance, the mother was at home when the interview was conducted, but allowed the use of her kitchen and the children were spoken to in her absence. In the other two instances, the children were at home alone. It is important to mention that differences in the quality of the interviews in regards to this variance were negligible. The children showed varied ability to communicate clearly, whether they were at home or at the office. Some children's answers were only short and monosyllabic; others changed the subject or just wanted to talk about everyday matters. At times it was necessary to ask the same question twice or follow-up what had been stated earlier and almost no question remained unanswered. Probing was used in order to assure all questions were answered. Probing is a type of follow-up question and its main goal is to enhance the deepness of the answer as stated by Starrin and Renck in the second chapter of the book *Kvalitativa Studier i teori och praktik* (Svensson & Starrin, 1996). Svensson and Starrin (1996) discuss Fielding (1993) in this chapter. Fielding (1993) wrote about problems and obstacles that can occur in qualitative interviewing. Probing was kept in mind when the children were spoken to, as well as keeping the questions simple; trying to listen to what they were really saying, not just the words, but their looks and expressions as well.

In order to understand the individual child in the family, his/her reactions and behavior, it is necessary to rely in part on developmental psychology and

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psychoanalytic theory. Furthermore, Freud's defense mechanisms are still valid and it is my opinion that they are helpful when trying to understand children's reactions to difficult situations or crisis (Björnsson, Sigurjón 1983).

The tendency to connect the subject to theories on communication, communication patterns and the interaction of individual and family with their environment or society is to be expected. Since the beginning of my career as a social worker and family therapist, various theories and research have caught my attention in one way or another. These theories were applied both consciously and subconsciously when conducting the interviews with the children.

Virginia Satir's (1967) theories on communication have long been considered classical and many family therapists use them as a basis, myself included. This is particularly the case in her approach towards families; emphasizing trust, reducing anxiety, helping the client feel comfortable and gaining the hope of change for the better. Satir (1967) wanted to teach families a new language and with it dissolve their problems. She believed that communication problems were the root of all family discord (Satir, 1967, Roness 1978, p. 99). Modern family therapists and authors that are attracted to narrative therapy (e.g. Michael White) talk about helping the family to tell or create a new history. I find similarities exist between these two theories. In both instances, the emphasis is to break people of a habit, either breaking them of useless communication habits or by preventing the individual from becoming stuck in their story about themselves and their situation.

Salvador Minuchin (1974) places emphasis on structure, the role of the family and approaches the family from their social environment. According to Minuchin (1974) the family is a unit that is constantly changing. It changes form parallel to the various needs of its family members. Change occurs when two social systems (the family and the therapist) help the family to develop a new beneficial system and the therapist helps the family to reorganize their daily life; effecting the dynamics and roles within the family (Minuchin, 1974, Roness 1978, p. 101). Thus, the reshuffling of family dynamics and roles is unavoidable when parents divorce, as seen in the diagram in chapter 4.

New theories in family therapy regarding interaction and relationships have been developing over the years and are still developing. This is characteristic of the Milan group (Boscolo, Cecchin, Hoffman, and Penn, 1987). Their assumption is based on systemic theory and is influenced by authors such as Gregory Bateson and Paul Watzlawick (Boscolo et al., 1987). They reject the psychodynamic view that an individual is the container of pathology, but rather use ideals such as positive connotation, hypothesizing, circularity and neutrality.

After the interview with the children they were given movie tickets in appreciation for their participation, (they were unaware of the reward ahead of time). This was an attempt to convey the importance of participating in research that might benefit other children who have similar experiences. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. After listening to the interviews they were categorized by questions and themes.

The coding of the interviews was based on the following categories:

1. How you were told
2. Feelings and thoughts
3. Changes

4. Support
5. Influence (positive and negative)
6. Wishes
7. Patterns of communication
8. Pearls of wisdom (gem)
9. Situation to day (school, friends, family, interests)

After thus thoroughly going through the data and with regard to my theoretical perspectives (see chapter 3) I chose two main themes to employ when the children's answers were analysed; i.e. *perception* and *coping*, which included the aforementioned subcategories. Especially included in this discussion are the children's wishes and those pearls of wisdom, symbolic of the children's spontaneous expression or account of events.

Perception includes sight, hearing, memory and interpretation. Harold Schelderup (1971) wrote in his book *Innföring i Psykologi* that the basis of all our knowledge of the world forms from how we experience things and events with the help of our senses (Schelderup, 1971). Mead, whom will be discussed more thoroughly in chapter 3, believes that interpretation is the main purpose of our senses as well as our ability to adapt and cope in our interaction with others (Blumer, 1969).

I have greatly relied on the concept of loyalty in my work with families. Experience has shown that loyalty holds a family together. It protects them from outside influences and their secrets are kept in the name of loyalty. Boszormenyi-Nagy (1973) has developed the loyalty concept as well as invisible loyalties. When analyzing the results of this study it is important to keep concepts such as these in mind.

Furthermore I found it important in this study to examine the child's opportunities and situation in light of the legislative framework that protects the child and offers the child certain rights.

2.5 Reliability and Validity

At this point, it is important to discuss those factors that can affect the outcome of an analysis. The sample varies in regards to gender and age, which could affect the complexity of the analysis based on the varying levels of maturity. Furthermore, having to rely on two sets of gatekeepers, first the ministers and then the parents is something that also needs to be examined. The first minister called parents from his list and asked if the researcher could call and discuss the possible participation of the children in a study while the second minister told his parish about the project and a 14 year old boy and his sister offered their participation. It is unknown how the parents presented the study to their children, but the parents were briefly advised about how to approach the subject. This is important because the parents' approach could affect how openly the child spoke about his/her personal experience. When it came to those parents who did not want their children to participate, they often explained their refusal without being asked. As stated earlier, in some instances the families did not

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fulfil the requirements set; i.e. age, and in two instances the parents had gotten back together. The process behind choosing a sample is quite complicated. However, it seemed better to conduct the sampling in this manner, rather than take a sample from CFS. The researcher was too close to the families at CFS and it would become difficult to keep the necessary perspective needed for this study. As stated earlier, only children of divorced families participated in the study, because the lack of statistical evidence of separations in co-habiting relationships.

The researcher's knowledge and experience of a phenomenon will always affect the outcome and research process, whether consciously or subconsciously. It is also important to add the subject of children's loyalty to their parents as this too will skew results. Will the child be afraid that they are being unfaithful to their parents by discussing their own personal experience of the divorce? Is it the child's true voice heard in the interview or do they sound as they imagine their parents would want them to?

It will also be difficult to determine whether various difficulties that some children had prior to the study were caused by their parents divorce or caused by other factors.

These questions are important to keep in mind when discussing reliability and validity. We can see here that both the researcher and participant can have an affect on the results. The interview itself could also have an affect; i.e. a connection is formed between two individuals whether it is based on trust offering sincerity and honesty or not.

3 Theoretical Perspective

3.1 Background

Recently, many studies on families have been conducted in Iceland, but I am unaware of any qualitative research on divorce conducted from the child's perspective. In her PhD thesis Dr. Sigrún Júlíusdóttir (1993) focused on those factors that strengthen the family. Those aspects that make it possible for families to withstand setbacks and adapt psychosocially. She states that just as important and interesting as the positive factors within a marriage are those factors that lead to divorce. Júlíusdóttir (1993) concluded that the factors most likely to lead to divorce were: promiscuity, alcohol abuse, distrust and lack of love. Sigrún Júlíusdóttir and Nanna K Sigurðardóttir (2000) conducted a study on joint custody and children's welfare after divorce. Their report states that child rearing and communication practices vary from country to country. In the report a German study by J. Oppawsky (1991) is cited. Oppawsky (1991) studied divorce from a child's perspective and found that children from West Germany did not communicate anger and were not as open in their reactions as children in the United States were. This indicates that cultural aspects could affect comparisons between countries and mandate how results from various studies should be read (Júlíusdóttir and Sigurðardóttir, 2000). Júlíusdóttir et al. (2000) recommend that comparisons be conducted within each country separately.

Results in an extensive study on parental divorce and the well being of children conducted in the United States in 1991 indicated that children who experienced divorce performed more poorly in certain areas (e.g. academically and socially), than children that live with both parents (Amato PR& Keith B, 1991). Thus the importance of examining the child's circumstances at the time of divorce seems pretty straightforward.

3.2 Mead's theories

It is interesting that the scientist who has integrated the views and theories of many of those mentioned in chapter 2 was a man ahead of his time. This, of course, was the American philosopher and social psychologist Georg Herbert Mead (1864 – 1931).

Mead has been able to integrate the fields of sociology, psychology and communications. As widely acknowledged, these fields form the basis of social work. Furthermore, it is important to examine the status of children as they are regarded in current legislation created to protect their interests and welfare, as stated earlier.

Mead believes that the interaction between children and the adults in their environment has a great influence on how the child grows and matures. This study reflects his theory by examining the child's relationship to those adults closest to them as well as their overall environment at the moment that great changes are afoot (i.e. their parents no longer live together). It is important to reflect on the child's own interpretation of the messages they are receiving from their environment. In other words, do these three factors predict the child's ability to survive the divorce process?

In the introduction of the book *Moderna samhällsteorier*, Per Månson (1995) writes that Georg Herbert Mead's theories are related to phenomenology, since they are based on human subjectivity and the concrete world in which individuals reside. Mead's theories discuss the origin and development of human consciousness.

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Through his theories, he tried to reconcile the objective and subjective in an individual's life by seeing both aspects as decisive factors in the social molding of the human being. Humans are social beings and it is through this process that humans become both the subject and object, influenced by other people and social situations (Manson, 1995).

At first, Mead called his theory "social behaviorism", but it was his students and colleague, Herbert Blumer, who coined the phrase symbolic interaction that was later associated with this theory (Manson, red. 1995; p.148). Mead's students and followers published a book of his lectures and notes, which has become a bible for the theory (Mead, 1934).

"Symbolic interaction is the interaction between people that takes place through symbols such as gestures, facial expressions, and, above all, language. Language is socially learned and is essential for all but the simplest forms of thought. In this sense the mind, through which we interpret our own behavior and that of others, is a social product" (Robertson, 1977, p.115).

This quote points out that the most important human trait is the ability to communicate and it is this attribute that makes humans the social beings that they are. Through interaction with others, people develop the self, i.e. the ability to experience oneself as a person. Mead has a wider definition of self than Freud does, because the development of a particular personality demands not only being around parents and *the particular other*, but also interacting with *the generalized other* or society. According to Mead, the conscious self grows within a social process.

What is needed, so that an infant develops into an adult with consciousness and personality, is the access to situations that is the same stimulus to the sender and the receiver. These situations are the basis for what Mead calls *role take over*. The self develops in the process of taking over a role or by taking in the views of others than oneself.

Symbolic interaction offers the possibility to an approach that can be useful when analyzing a child's situation within the family. Here I am referring to family communication; the child in relation to the particular other and even the meaning gained by watching a person interact with their environment while under the influence of the generalized other. It is also important to examine the individuals influence on others and on his/her environment while being influenced by the particular other and the generalized other.

As stated before, Herbert Blumer has expanded Mead's theories. He feels that:

"Symbolic interactionism rests in the last analysis on three simple premises. The first premise is that human beings act toward things on the basis of meanings that the things have for them. Such things include everything that the human being may note in his world – physical objects, such as trees or chairs; other human beings, such as a mother or a store clerk; categories of human beings, such as friends or enemies; institutions, as a school or government; guiding ideals, such as individual independence or honesty; activities of others, such as their commands or requests; and such situations as an individual encounters in his daily life. The second premise is that the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows. The third premise is that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters". (Blumer, 1969, p. 2)

Theoretical Perspective

This is the heart of these theories. What really matters is how the child interprets its surroundings when families change and the parents no longer reside together. Their interpretation can vary greatly from that of their parents, family or friends. Furthermore, it is possible that their interpretation of the situation could determine how the child handles these new circumstances.

In continuation of Blumer's (1969) analysis of Mead, he states that Mead identifies two forms or levels of social interaction in human society. He refers to them respectively as "the conversation of gestures" and "the use of significant symbols". However he distinguishes the difference between *non symbolic interaction* and *symbolic interaction*. "Non symbolic interaction takes place when one responds directly to the action of another without interpreting that action; symbolic interaction involves interpretation of the action" (Blumer, 1969, p.8).

Meads sees the symbolic interaction as a presentation of gestures and a response to the meaning of those gestures. Three lines are discussed in relation to this; i.e. *Mead's Triadic Nature of Meaning*:

"It signifies what the person to whom it is directed is to do; it signifies what the person who is making the gesture plans to do; and it signifies the joint action that is to arise by the articulation of the acts of both. If there is confusion or misunderstanding along any one of these three lines of meaning, communication is ineffective, interaction is impeded, and the formation of joint action is blocked". (Blumer, 1969, p.9).

3.3 What it Means to be a Child

Barbro Lenn er – Axelson (1983) believes that the romantic attachment between a man and a women in our time has unfortunately taken front seat; shadowing the loving relationship of children and parents. "For the happiness of adults many children pay a high price" (sw. "f r de vuxnas lycka f r m nga barn betala ett h gt pris") (Lenn er Axelson in Bo thius ed., 1983, p. 46). She speaks of a breach of faith in regards to children in the same manner that spouses are able to. "Sexual infidelity is seen as one of the biggest sins of our time. I doubt this is true and wonder if in many divorces when the conflict is around the children is possibly just as great a transgression against the child".(Lenn er - Axelson in Bo thius ed., 1983, p. 45).

The one constant is that there will always be changes to the family dynamics following divorce. Children must retain contact with more than one family and new dynamics form over time; i.e. stepfamilies, romantically attached adults who do not live together, lone parents with or without children etc. Children must participate in this matrix of family rules that evolve over time; rules that are often more complex and difficult than those in a nuclear family. Furthermore, the adults who touch the child's life multiply dramatically.

Judith S. Wallerstein and Joan Berlin Kelly (1980) researched how children and parents cope with divorce. They believe that the positive attitude of both parents towards the visitation rights of the parent who does not live with the child (most often the father) has a positive impact on the crisis created by divorce. This positive attitude can dictate the development and adaptation of the child later in life (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Bente and Gunnar  berg (1992) emphasize the importance of the parent who no longer lives with the child. Their research indicated that the child often desires more contact with their father than visitation allows ( berg, 1992).

Lars Dencik (1999) wrote about the children of the future in his book *Børn og familie i det postmoderne samfund*. He states that Nordic society like other industrialised societies is characterised by a high rate of change that affects all areas of human existence. Systematic globalism wraps us in continual financial changes and interconnectedness, which connotes that social and cultural factors are constantly changing. These various social phenomena have shorter and shorter life expectancies; few remaining unchanged for long periods, neither family nor lifestyles. Because society is changing so quickly, researchers can run into difficulties. Many theories that make up the bulk of our scientific knowledge of children, their development and behaviour are based on an experience that no longer exists in today's ever changing world (Dencik & Schultz, 1999).

3.4 Power vs. Powerless

It is enlightening to consider what influence children have on their own lives or what influence they experience having in certain circumstances. At a young age, the child is completely dependent on its parents to have all its needs met. The child is dependent on its parents love, goodwill and sense of responsibility as well as their childrearing skills. Most parents would agree that one of the biggest changes they have ever experienced in their lives was having a child. With the birth of a new child, their lifestyles changed and the parents had to fulfill the unconditional needs of this new being regardless of their own needs or wishes. In this respect the influence of child and parent is a dichotomy; the parents hold some power over their child, but the child creates changes in their parents' lives, never before experienced. Some parents experience the child having power over them; i.e. when they disobey or do the opposite of their parents' wishes. At the other extreme, children are not expected to give permission or participate in important parental decisions; decisions that could have a great influence on the child's life; e.g. when parents decide to move, have the child switch schools, separate etc. The child's powerlessness is rooted primarily in their lack of influence on the outer environment and in what kind of family they live in.

Appelberg, Lindstein, Elofson and Johanson (1988) studied the influence children have on their environment. Their study indicated that children believe that the older they are the more opportunity they have to influence or participate in decisions about their life (along with their parents). According to Appelberg et al. (1988) society does not recognize the child's right to make decisions. It is the parents or the ombudsman who make decisions concerning the child (Appelberg et al., 1988).

According to the Icelandic Laws regarding Children (Barnalögin), parents are obligated to care for their child, give it attention, loving and fulfill childrearing responsibilities in accordance with the child's best interest and needs. It is the parents' responsibility to create the appropriate living conditions and welfare at all time. Other adults around children should also show them respect and care (1st. article). The aim of the legislation is to ensure that children in less than optimum conditions receive assistance. This is achieved by strengthening the family in its role as provider and caregiver, while employing protective resources when appropriate.²

² <http://www.althingi.is/dba-bin/unds.pl?txi=wwwtext/html/lagasofn/128b/2002080>

Theoretical Perspective

The first article of the Act defines the child's right to know both parents. Mothers are obligated to offer paternity. Here emphasis is placed on the right of the child over the right or wishes of the parent. Additionally, if we consider the child's influence, and opportunity for them to influence their circumstances opens in article 43, where it states that a child of appropriate maturity is given the choice to speak out about their case, unless this would harm the child in some way. Older legislation relies on 12 years as being the age of appropriate maturity in this case.³

It is evident that both the lawmakers and society are determined to protect the rights and welfare of children. The responsibility lies not only firmly on the shoulders of the parents, but also on the shoulders of the institutions present in the child's life. Thus, the child is never responsible for its circumstances, but rather they could be viewed as being victims of it.

³ <http://www.althingi.is/lagas/nuna/2003076.html>

4 Presentation of the Material

In this chapter, the basis of the study will be introduced; or in other words, the material the study is based on. In the description of the families, facts rather than opinions will be emphasized; i.e. facts built on information from both the children and their parents.

Genograms have been chosen in order to create a picture of the family before and after divorce allowing us to see the changes that occur to the family dynamics. Genograms have widely been used by family therapists, either as part of therapy in cooperation with the family or as a tool for the therapist to see certain factors within the family. Murray Bowen (1976) can be considered the pioneer in the use of genograms. He assumed that family patterns, relations and structure carry on from one generation to the next; patterns he called *multigenerational transmission*. Bowen (1976). The genogram has been defined as, “family-tree diagrams that record information about family members and their relationship over at least three generations” (Estrada & Haney, 1998). In this report, genograms are used to show the varying family structure before the divorce and at the time of the interview. It also is used to introduce the individuals concerned, thus only two generations are represented (see figure 1).

Each family is named after the first six letters in the Greek alphabet and each individual will be introduced by age and gender. Thus, a 17 year old girl becomes G17 and a 14 year old boy B15, etc. IP refers to the individual being interviewed (interviewed person). All other markings are described in the key below the first figure. The parents’ answers to their questions are also below each figure to help define the child’s environment.

The parents’ responses to questions regarding cooperation and custody are indicative of the child’s environment and what their world looks like (both inner and outer environments) when the parents do not live together. If we assume that, the parents are the most important people in a child’s life then the parents’ behavior influence the child’s emotional and social development. Lars-Erik Berg (1995) who wrote about Mead and symbolic interaction stated:

“The child needs adults present in their life that hold varying views about the world at large. At the same time it is important for the child’s stable development of personality to have access to the most important adults in our culture; the mother, father and a few others” (Månson, ed 1995 p.156).

Information gained from the parents in phone interviews centered mainly on cooperation between parents, as well as whether they wanted their custody arrangements changed or not.

4.1 The Alpha Family

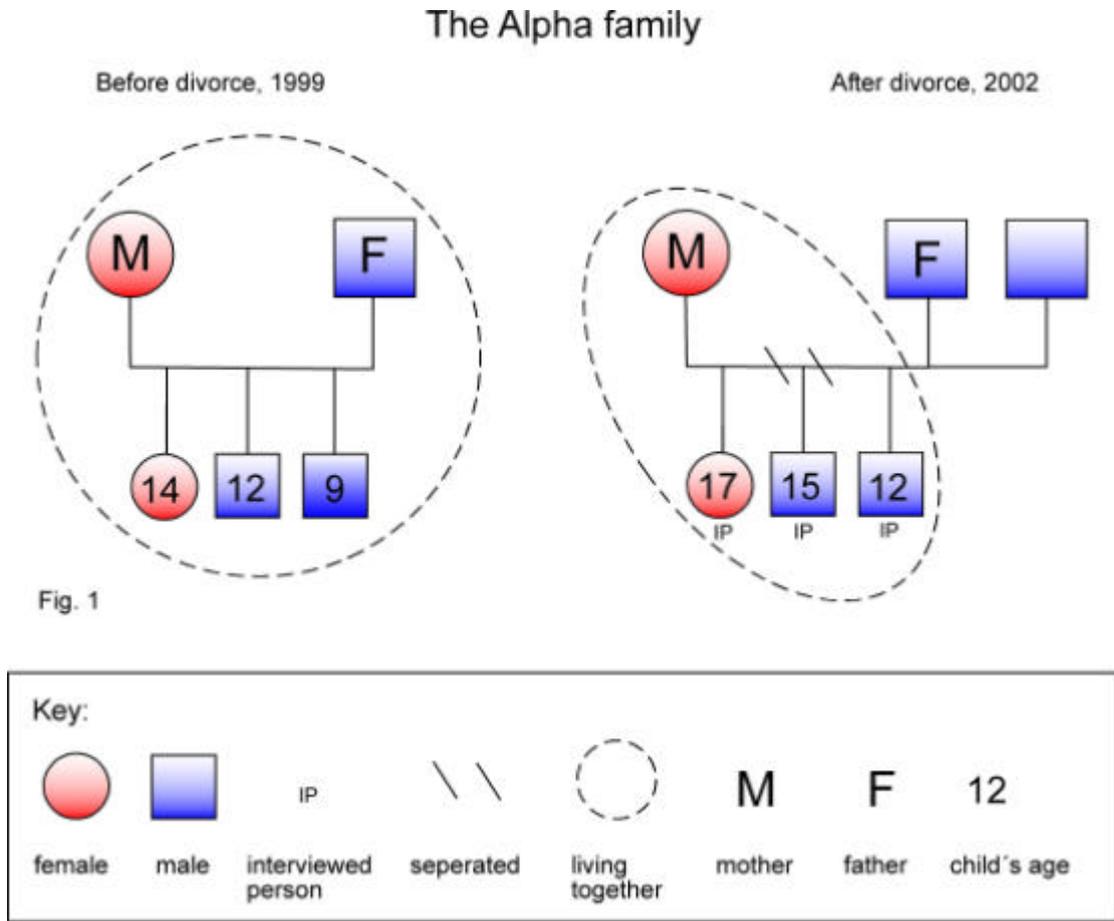


Figure 1 The Alpha Family

The mother's comments:

"In the beginning adherence to [custody] rules were strict and communication between us very sensitive. This is better now".

"I wish he could take more responsibility. The children are mainly with me. I wish he could take more initiative".

The father's comments:

"The cooperation is going well. We try to discuss all problems".

"I don't have any special wishes; at least I'd have to think about it. I would like to have the children more often".

Before divorcing in 1999, the Alpha family consisted of two parents with three children; a fourteen year old daughter and two sons 12 and nine. All three siblings participated in the study. When I spoke to them the girl was 17 and the boys were 15 and 12. At the time of divorce the father moved out of the family home and the children remained with the mother. Changes to the environment were small at first thus their social environment; i.e. school and friends, changed very little. The

Presentation of the Material

children continued to live in their old residence for some time, but they had moved to a new residence a year and a half prior to when the interview took place. They lived in the same district, but were more centrally located. Their father moved to another district. Soon after his move from the family residence he moved in with another man and is currently cohabiting with him today. The mother has remained single following the divorce. The parents share custody. The brothers are usually at their father's residence every weekend, but the daughter visits when she wishes.

All three siblings spoke about financial problems following the divorce, especially the brothers. G17 has had many problems. She was diagnosed with anorexia at the age of fourteen. She has also suffered from depression, alcoholism and has twice tried to commit suicide. Today she says she still suffers from depression and anxiety, and she still has not fully recovered from anorexia. During this time she has been supported by a psychologist and social worker, but temporarily left therapy, because she feels she has covered all her problems. Currently she visits a psychologist. She says she tries to do her best academically in spite of her problems and currently attends a community junior college. She has a few good friends and they support her. She spends most of her free time with them.

B15 is in the tenth grade and has remained in the same elementary school throughout his school career. His interests are music, foot and handball. He says he has a good friend and is doing well. His dream is to become a psychologist.

B12 is in the seventh grade and has only changed schools once (a year and a half ago). He does not feel that he does well in school. He believes that others find him boring. He has been bullied, but it has gotten better. He says he has three friends. He normally does not meet his friends after school, but stays at home with his computer, his one and only interest. He is worried that he spends too much time in front of the computer.

4.2 The Beta Family

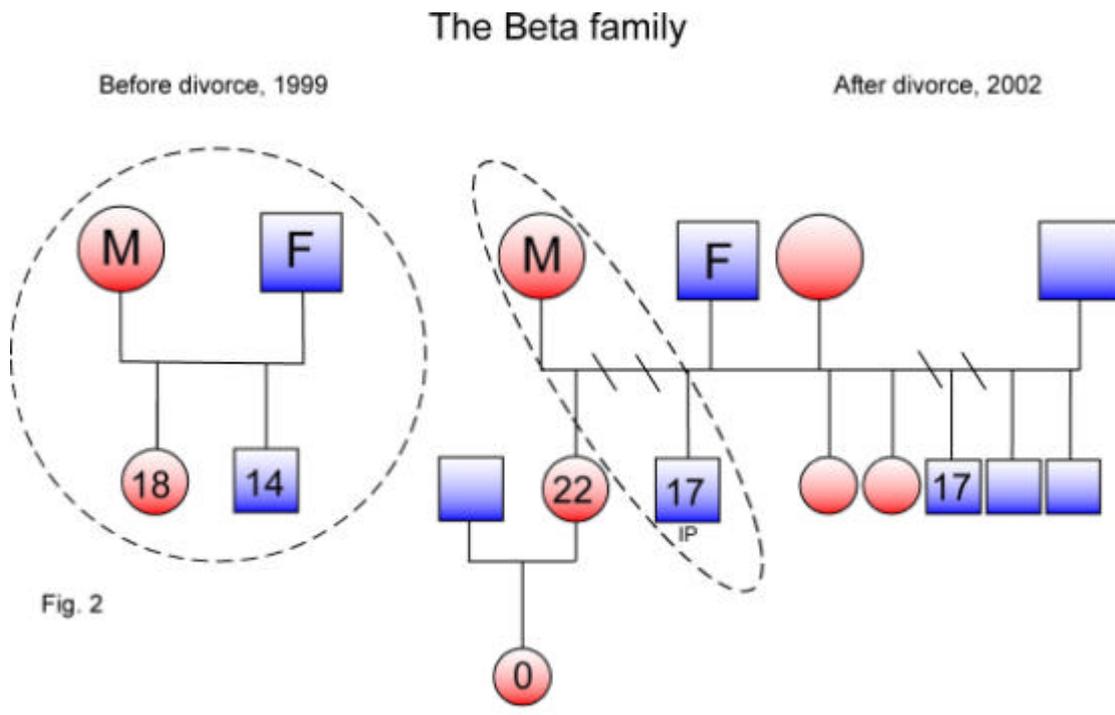


Figure 2 The Beta Family

The mother's comments:

"There has been very little cooperation. We haven't spoken since the divorce".

"I would have liked more communication. I believe the new wife has quite an influence on this. He left me for her".

The father's comments:

"The arrangement is good – I don't know any better than everything is fine- nothing has been to the contrary".

2It's always possible to improve something. Always possible to do better. Its fine the way it is. I am fairly happy with the arrangement-have no wish to change it".

The Beta family consisted of two parents and two children, a boy and a girl. When the parents divorced in 1999 the boy was 14 and the girl 18. The father soon stated a new household with another woman whom he had been in contact with before the divorce. She is also divorced and has five children. Three of her children lived with her when the father moved in, but there is only one child residing there today. The parents in Beta family share custody. When this study was conducted the children were 22 and almost 17 years of age. The girl has moved away from home and has set up her own house. The son participated in the interview (see figure 2).

When I spoke to him, he had been unemployed for one month and his attitude varies towards his situation. He says that it is difficult to gain employment at the age of 17, because most employers are looking for someone at least 18-20 years old. He is learning to drive and can not wait to get his drivers license. He says that he has never done well at school, so he decided to quit. He was bullied quite a lot at school and

had difficult studying because he has dyslexia. He says he has many friends and that he meets five or six at least daily. They talk about cars, everything involved with cars and all the electric stuff in cars. He expects he will be a lorry driver in the future, following in his father's footsteps. B17 lives with his mother today and has done so throughout, except for living six months with his father shortly after the divorce before his father moved in with his new partner. He says he can always call his father and even visit or spend the night, but visitations are not regular. However, he can always stop by his father's house at anytime, whether anyone is at home or not and grab himself a bite to eat or whatever. His stepbrother aged 17 is the only step sibling his connected to.

4.3 The Gamma Family

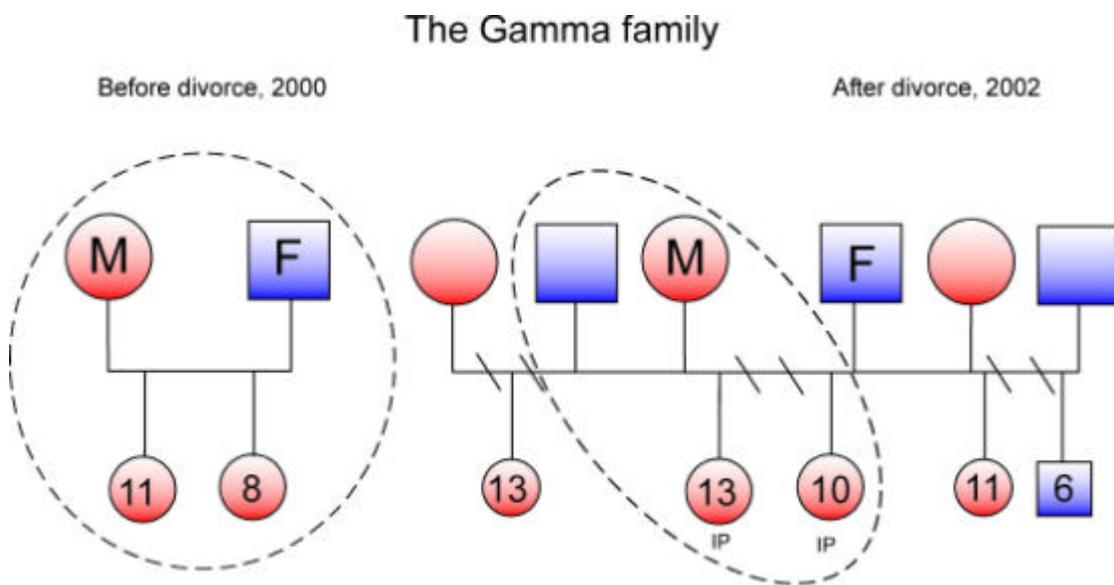


Fig. 3

Figure 3 The Gamma Family

The mother's comments:

"All arrangements are made by me and I have sole custody. I don't want the father to be spoken to about the research project or the children's participation. I initiated the divorce and he can see the children every other weekend, but very little in between".

"I wish I could have some communication with my ex-husband and would like to improve our parental cooperation. All communication goes through the oldest daughter. Their father does not initiate contact with them. I wish this could be more normal".

When the study is conducted, it has been two years since the divorce in the Gamma family. G13 and G10 are the interviewees and I spoke to them both at the same time, the exception to the individual interviews I conducted. The reason for this is that the interview was conducted at their home and the older sister wanted to have her younger sister with her and I conceded. The sisters were home alone when I came. After the divorce the father moved out and the mother has sole custody. The mother

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asked me not to contact the father. The sisters had to move and change schools shortly following the divorce. The mother is in a new relationship and a new man moved in six months ago. He has a thirteen old daughter from a previous relationship that the two sisters have come to know. The Gamma father lives with a woman who has two children from a previous relationship. The sisters have visited their father every other weekend following the divorce and have come to know their step siblings there as well. G13 says that at times they visit their father in the middle of the week or go out to eat with him. G13 is in the eighth grade and likes Icelandic and home economics. She feels she does well in school and has a few good friends. Her confirmation will be in the spring 2003. G10 is in the fourth grade. She says that she too does well in school and has good friends, both boys and girls. Both sisters have big dreams for the future. The older sister wants to be a midwife, because she enjoys little children and often baby-sits for others. The younger sister wants to be a famous actor.

4.4 The Delta Family

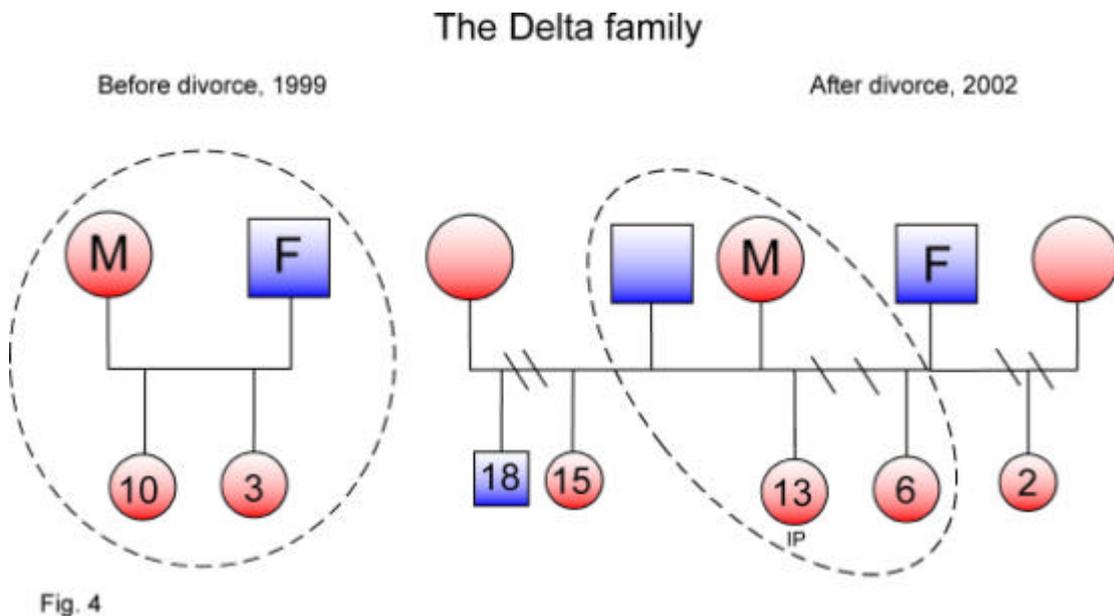


Figure 4 The Delta Family

The mother's comments:

"In the beginning we had joint custody, but now I have it. At first communication was lousy – then their father began to cohabit [with another woman] and contact was less, yet bad while he was cohabiting. He normally doesn't speak to me".

"Our cooperation is good today – have no real wishes – am happy today".

The father's comments:

"It was unfortunate and the communication was horrible at first. Everything exploded- there was another man-she had been with another man for one year- it was an ugly and sad situation. We did not have more contact than was necessary".

"I don't have any special requests for change- my daughters have started to call more often. I have now wishes considering how it has been".

In 1999, at the time of divorce the Delta family has two children aged ten and three. The interviewee was the daughter and is thirteen when the study was conducted. Originally following the divorce the parents shared custody but now the mother has sole custody and the children live with her. The father moved out, but they soon sold the apartment and they lived for a few months with their grandmother on their mother's side. Afterwards the mother and children moved into a smaller apartment and have resided there ever since. G13 did not have to change schools. Soon after, the father moved in with another woman and they have a two year old girl. The father and that woman are divorced and he currently lives by himself. The Delta mother currently lives with a new man and they are expecting. The new man has two children from a previous relationship. G13 is very interested in sports and practices both football and handball. According to her she does alright at school; not excellent but not badly either. She has three best friends and they spend a lot of time together even after school. G13 visits her father every other weekend along with her sister. Their little half-sister also joins them there. G13 says she also spends the night with her father now and then; when she is able to and when it suits the father.

4.5 The Eta Family

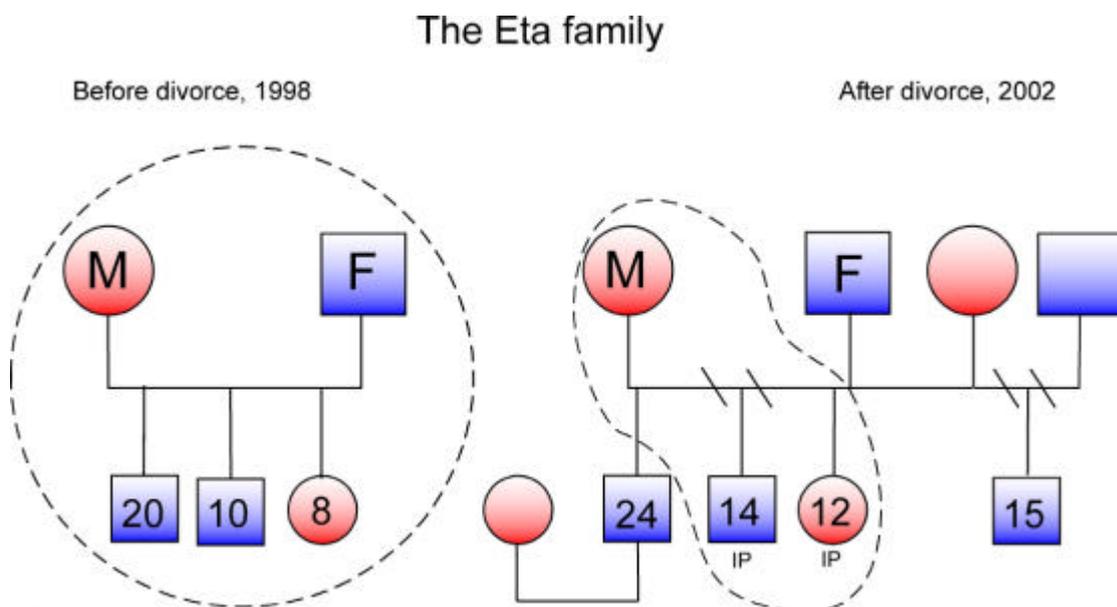


Fig. 5

Figure 5-The Eta Family

Presentation of the Material

The mother's comments:

"We separated first for a few months then got back together- then divorced for good. It was terrible to do it- people only go through it when it is absolutely necessary. I felt it was important for the custody be joint, because he was so unhappy about the divorce. The children don't see him much. He has the heart, just not the initiative".

"I wish the boy could have more say about visitation. I am very unhappy with his anger. He talks about our marriage with the children. I try my hardest not to speak badly of him in front of the children".

The father's comments:

"I don't know what would have happened if custody had not been joint. I feel that the arrangement is sometimes broken. I have very little influence in my children's lives and feel that it is molded by the other parent".

"I wish that the arrangement had been followed better. I have been left out a lot in this situation- kept out. I wish I had more influence in the children's lives".

In 1998, the Eta family consisted of three children, a 20 year old son, a ten year old son and an eight year old daughter. The parents share custody. They first separated in 1997 but got back together for a few months and in 1998, they divorced. The interviewees from this family were the 14 year old boy and 12 year old girl. The younger siblings live with their mother but see their father regularly. The older brother lived with his father and new partner at first, but moved out on his own at an early age (before 20). He has started his own household now. The siblings had to move into a smaller residence shortly following the divorce. They moved from a house to an apartment in the same neighborhood so they did not have to change schools. The father has lived in various areas and moved often following the divorce. The mother does not have a new partner, while the father lives with a woman who has a 15 year old son from a previous relationship. B14 is in the ninth grade. He has many friends and does well at school, but places more emphasis on the social rather than academic. His best courses are math and history. He has played sports for many years and competed in swimming. He sees an athletic psychologist to work on his anger that he felt for a long time following his divorce. G12 is in the seventh grade. She believes that life is going well for her today; school is all right and she has many friends (five best friends). She plays basketball and is often at practice after school with her friends. Her main interest is animals. She keeps pets at home and is a lot around animals in the country at her grandparents on her mother's side.

4.6 The Theta Family

The Theta family

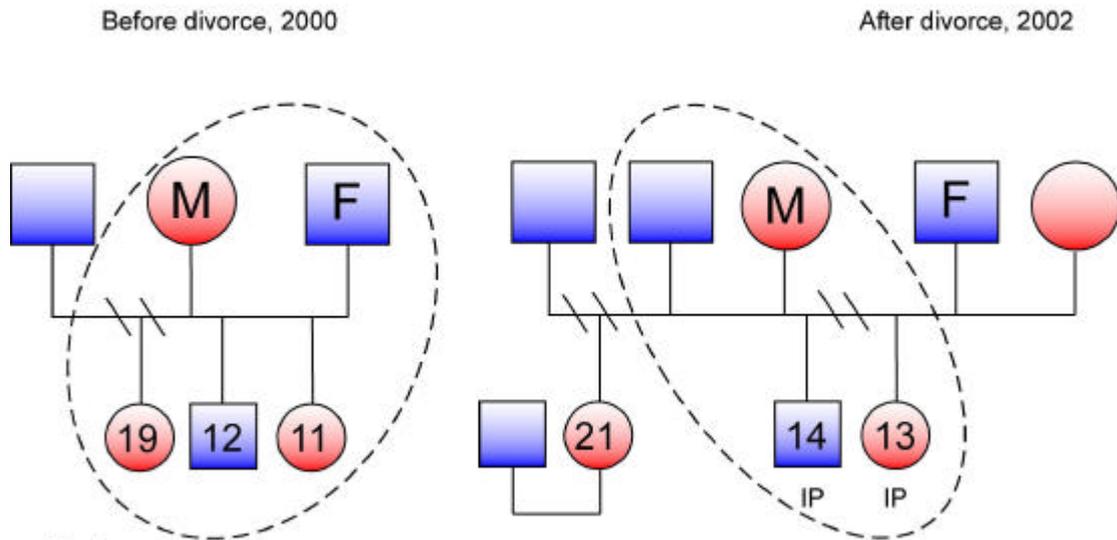


Fig. 6

Figure 6 The Theta Family

The mother's comments:

"There is very little contact between us, but we are not enemies. We both agreed on the divorce. I believe that his absence overseas had a big influence on my inability to live with him because of the education of my daughter from a previous relationship".

"I am happy with the visitation arrangement, but wished that they [the children and their father] could be in more contact with each other".

The Theta family is the last family in the sample. Prior to the divorce the parents lived with three children; a 19 year old daughter from the wife's previous relationship, a 12 year old boy and 11 year old girl. The interviewees are the brother and sister, 13 and 14 respectively at the time of the interview (see figure 6).

The mother has sole custody of the children and the father lives abroad. When they all lived together, the father was often away because of his work. Following the divorce, he moved out for good. He now lives with his new wife and they were married in the summer 2002. The mother soon began a relationship with another man following the divorce and he practically lives with the family although he has his own apartment. The oldest sister has moved out and started her own home. After the divorce, the family had to move to a new neighborhood in the same district by the children, B14 and G13 did not need to change schools, but G13 says she finds it difficult to get to school on time, because it is so far away. She is in the eighth grade and likes school. The siblings were allowed to choose whether they changed schools, but both chose to stay in their old school. They both say that they miss being able to meet friends after school. G13's favorite course in school is art and she is mainly interested in skiing. Both children ski with their father abroad. B14 is in the ninth grade and says that everything is fine. He is interested in cooking and wants to be a chef following school. He is also interested in music and computers. The children go

Presentation of the Material

to see their father at least twice a year. They live with him one month in the summer and two weeks in the winter. The father also comes to Iceland at least twice a year and visits the children.

5 Themes of Interpretation: Analysis of Results

In this section, the main themes that characterise the children's experience of the parents' divorce are shown. The main categories that characterise the questions the children were asked are; feelings and thoughts, influences and changes, support and their situation today. As stated earlier, the analysis is based on two main themes *perception* and *coping*. Each theme contains certain underlying categories. For instance perception; feelings, thoughts and the child's interpretations; and coping; the process, how their life changed and what support they received. Furthermore, the children's wishes and theories about their life and situation will be analysed. In the last chapter, the whole picture will then be analysed through the eyes of the child and the results presented.

5.1 Perception

"Perception does not depend on how things are, rather how we are" (Schelderup 1971, p.103). Thus, we see, interpret and remember the same course of events differently, which is the psychological definition of perception. Mead believes that most important is our interpretation of events. Interpretation is a main aspect of perception and is performed in relation to other people. What is the meaning of the things we experience? The meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters (Blumer, 1969).

When the children's answers are analysed from their perception it is important to keep in mind how the children perceive the turn of events. What they hear and see when the parents say they are going to divorce or when they find out about it (how you were told); what thoughts emerged and what feelings surfaced (feelings and thoughts); and how children perceive and interpret the interaction within the family (symbolic interaction).

5.1.1 Perception in the Alpha family:

The siblings' perception in the Alpha family of the course of event varies; i.e. they each have their own view about how they were told about the divorce. However, the clarity in which they recall events is consistent, which is indicative of the great impact it had. G17 is very angry and says that you never suspected it, in spite the fact that she was aware that her parents did not always get along.

..." and I saw the letter in my mother's drawer and read it and found out that way you see.... Oh...it was a very sad letter...he just said that he was gay...and that he loved us all very much and how terrible he felt. Yes the letter was supposed to be to mom and we were not supposed to find out right away". (G17in Alpha).

"Yes I was very angry that they didn't tell us right away and felt betrayed Just a lot of anger...and shock...you never expect it...that this could happen...!..... it was a very hard time and it was difficult...yet you always imagined dad and mom together...living together...and you still have imagine it "(G17 in Alpha).

B15 was scared and insecure; speaking of how uncomfortable it was. He was surprised. He is the only child to remember a family meeting where the issue was discussed.

Themes of Interpretation: Analysis of Results

"We sat in the kitchen- the whole family – they wanted our opinion – asked what we thought. Yes they just said you see...we are very sorry but we need to divorce...it is not working out and something like that". (B15in Alpha).

"I was very scared and insecure...it was the feeling...it surprised. It was like...I thought it was very strange...very uncomfortable so that you didn't want to talk about it...it was hard to talk about it first". (B15 in Alpha).

B12 believes that the events are somehow connected to him, that he had been to annoying or that his father wanted to get rid of him. He did not speak to his mother for a whole month. He finds it difficult to understand the reason for the divorce. He still does not understand what homosexuality is and is still very angry with his father.

"No one told me, just all of the sudden one day after it happened dad didn't come home, I didn't understand why".(B12in Alpha).

"It was very difficult for me, I started to pout, didn't talk to mom for one month... I felt very bad- asked dad whether he was glad to be rid of me" I still haven't grasped it, figured it out (homosexuality) I am still mad at dad" (B12).

The main thread throughout is the strong emotional reaction of all the children. The divorce was unexpected and none of them were prepared for it. Furthermore, they had to deal with the social reaction to homosexuality.

This is the child's first reaction. According to Mead, it is the *meaning* that each person attaches to the circumstance that is significant. The meaning is derived from the interaction with others and the *interpretative process* that begins can dictate how a person survives a particular crisis, as we will see later (Blumer, 1969).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) define two factors that dictate the length and intensity of the child's reaction to their parents' divorce. First, the intensity of family relations and secondly, how much the children are drawn into the process. The child needs the opportunity to react and adapt to the new situation. Most important is that the child does not take responsibility for the divorce and the parents need to remain in the child's life (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

5.1.2 Perception in the Beta Family.

In the Beta family, the mother tells her son about the divorce. Three years later B17 is still wondering why his father did not tell him about the divorce when he picked him up at his friend's house. The father had moved out earlier that day, but did not it all to the son.

" Hmm I was at my friends house and I asked dad to drive me home...he was at work see...drives a taxi at night and well he didn't tell me...see I just found out when I got home and mom told me" (B17 in Beta).

According to B17, his parents did not talk about it with him. He called his father the following day, but his father did not discuss the divorce with him and he did not ask about it either.

B17 did not expect the divorce and when he hears the news he decides to go to bed, "sleep on it", as he said himself. It was as if he wanted to wake up from this nightmare.

Themes of Interpretation: Analysis of Results

“I didn’t expect it see (the divorce). I obviously...as soon as mom told me then I decided naturally to go to sleep...try to sleep on it. I naturally...I didn’t feel very good. Yes, I felt bad that dad didn’t tell me see when he was driving me home. Yes that was the only thing I felt was kind of bad, because I asked him to drive me home and I didn’t know that he had moved out see” (B17 in Beta).

B17 had just lost his grandfather and great-grandfather and then the third male in his life was leaving. B17 is not very descriptive when discussing his feelings. He says that he didn’t feel very well and found it, *“kind of sad”* that his dad did not tell him he had moved out when he drove him home. When B17 was interviewed I felt that his actions and facial expressions conveyed a deep grief. He, similar to the children in the Alpha family, was unprepared for the news and the father had already moved out when he receives it.

5.1.3 Perception in the Gamma Family

The sisters in the Gamma family are told about the divorce separately and the mother told them that the dad had moved out. In other words, the father has already moved out when they receive the news. Both of them said that they were glad because the couple argued a lot. When the mother was asked for permission to talk to her daughter, she said she was sure that the daughter would say that she was happy that they got divorced. Furthermore, the mother did not give permission to contact the father, which awakes the question of how the girls respond. Does it reflect the discussion within the family? In addition, the sisters were interviewed together unlike the other children. The youngest almost echoed the older sister in many ways.

“It was ...my mom that told me when I got home from school Yes she said: Now me and your father have divorced and your father lives there and so on and so on and something like that.(G13 in Gamma).

Yes I was just very happy, (when she got told about the divorce)...just because I thought it was uncomfortable when they were always arguing and just didn’t get along together (G13in Gamma).

My mom just told me the same. I don’t know, just fine (about the parents divorce). I thought it was good that they got divorced because they didn’t feel right together (G10 in Gamma).

The girls assertion that they were relieved when they found out was interesting and shows that answers can often be quite different from what the researcher expects based on experience and knowledge.

The Norwegian psychologist Wencke Seltzer (1997) wrote that it is important not to interpret the client from your own values, but allow him/her to make their own interpretations.

“The question is whether we hear the clients voice and not [just] what the client says that coincides with our understanding”. (N: “Spørgsmålet er altså om vi hører klientens stemme, ikke om klienten sier det som passer i vår oppfatning”)(Seltzer, WJ 1997).

Here Seltzer, like Mead, suggests that is each individual’s interpretation, which is significant for him/her. The girls’ interpretation of the circumstance is positive. It is most likely that their positive interpretation will help them adjust to the changes.

The sisters' relief that the parents no longer live together can be understood from the perspective that they no longer have to live with the parents' discord and arguments.

5.1.4 Perception in the Delta Family.

When G13 in the Delta family finds out about the divorce, she grieves and is even worried whether she will have to change schools. During the interview, it became apparent that she was very relieved when this was not the case. The parents were open and discussed their decision with her and she asked them for a reason.

“ I just remember when they told me it...I was coming home from a birthday at my girlfriends. I still remember what day it was and everything ... and we started talking about it. They said that they were going to get divorced and see and then I started to cry and something, see. Yes then I just went to sleep, I can't remember more...it was about ten o'clock or something. Yes and then when they told me about it, then I asked why they were getting divorced and they told me that they didn't get along and something”(G13 in Delta).

It is noteworthy how clearly the children can recall the course of events. G13 remembers the date and the weather that evening. Her first reaction is similar to many people who receive bad news; denial and think it is best to sleep it off like B17.

She did not feel very well *“I didn't feel too well”* but that can be a normal response for a teenager, which depicts deep distress. She even considers that this type of thing should not happen to her. G13 was unprepared for the news.

“I just remember that I didn't feel very well. Yes it scared me a bit, felt like something like this shouldn't have to happen to me or you know. Naturally I thought I would have to move and was kind of scared that I would have to move away from school...I didn't want to change schools” (G13 in Delta).

G13 clearly shows her worry about what effects the divorce will have. She might have to move and change schools. A thought she finds very difficult like others in the study.

5.1.5 Perception in the Eta Family.

The main difference in the Eta family in comparison to the other families is that the parents separated twice; i.e. they tried to get back together in hope that their relationship would be better. Thus, the children experienced news of the impending divorce twice, while having their hopes elevated in the interim. Then, later they were let down. Both times the family held a meeting. The children were told about the divorce together by both parents.

B14's reaction is very strong. He loses his temper and his first response is in the form of anger towards his parents. He feels forgotten and that his parents think mainly about themselves, but he definitely feels that the children should be included because it is their problem also. This affects his schooling where he shows destructive behavior and he almost quit the one important thing in his life; swimming.

“Yes they called us to the table and I saw a bit later that there was no happy faces see and then I realized. Yes then when they started talking about it I went crazy see...people

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say that I have a big temper. Yes I stood up and threw the plate on the floor and ran out....then the next day my dad was gone and was somewhere downtown” (B14 in Eta).

It was very hard and dad was away somewhere...then they were just thinking about themselves a lot and forgot me and my sister a lot...they just worried about their own problems and I often stayed with friends. I just felt bad... felt like they had forgotten about me. Yes I was really angry. Yes it was their problem you understand but not forgetting us because we think it is a problem as well because it is our dad and mom, understand (B14 in Eta).

B14 definitely believes that this should also be the children’s issue. His opinion is congruent with my experience in working with divorce; the children are often held at a distance, possibly in an attempt to protect them. The children are obviously an important party in this issue. However, some parents are not ready to give their children the support they need because of their own inner turmoil.

“Children can’t (pretend) not to care when your dad lives in one place and your mother another, its not possible see” (B14 Eta family).

G12’s reactions are anger and sadness, but mainly her lack of control over the situation. She really could not do anything and felt she should not do anything. Both siblings see the parents as being responsible for the situation.

“Hmm...I was rather angry and sad...couldn’t really do anything...felt like I couldn’t do anything...i wasn’t meant to do anything. I just thought it sucked all over again (when they got divorced the second time), but I think the first time had been the worst...because I didn’t expect it” (G12 in Eta).

Once again we observe that the children do not see the divorce coming.

G12 remembers how happy she was when the parents reconciled and her disappointment was greater when it did not work out.

“... and I was so happy that I told my girlfriend...and everything was paradise again...and then they told us again. ..that it wouldn’t work out like this and then my brother got really angry and stomped on the Danish and broke the plate and was going to try to run out again but it didn’t work out for him...Oh I don’t know ... all of the sudden it was all gone or the thought of paradise”(G12 in Eta).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) emphasise the divorce is a long process that involves various changes. One could conclude that the process is prolonged and the children must suffer more when the couple try to reconcile and fail. “For the adult as for the child, divorce is not a single event. It is a chain of events – a series of legal, social, psychological, economic and sexual changes, strung complexly together and extending over time” (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

As stated in the chapter on theoretical perspective, the ability to voice one’s opinion has a great importance and makes humans the social beings that they are. It is through interaction with others that the self is developed and thus the ability to experience themselves as a person. Meads definition connotes that to develop once must form more social connections than just with our parents. We need to interact with the generalized other (the environment, society, relatives and friends). It is important to remember that parents cannot offer the child the support it needs based on the circumstances they are in (Blumer, 1969).

5.1.6 Perception in the Theta Family.

In the Theta family, the father lived and worked overseas so the children were not used to daily interactions with both parents. The mother had prepared the son for the news of the divorce and had clearly explained the reason; i.e. that a long-distance relationship is difficult. Thus, the divorce did not come as a surprise to him. However, the sister was unprepared. She experienced fear that she would lose her father. The family held a meeting to discuss the divorce.

“He was of course never at home. ...I knew why it was (the divorce). Just he was never at home and it didn’t work out like that. It was ...of course nothing fun but it was nothing like that...I wasn’t surprised. No he lived over seas and I thought that maybe we would not see him as often” ... (B14 in Theta).

The siblings’ reaction is somewhat mild and can probably be explained by the father often being away from home. It is most likely that a great change such as when a father abruptly moves away that is most painful for children.

“Yes I was at one of my girlfriends’ house...and then my mom phoned me and told me to come home...I went home and they sat there at the table and they told me they were going to get ... We sat there all four of us and talked about it” (G13 in Theta).

G13 seems to be very sensitive to her parents’ welfare. She could tell that they were not happy in spite the fact that there were never arguments or fights. She reasons that this is better for her parents. However an emotional tug-of-war is evident when she says she does not care and yet does.

“I was, see, I didn’t really care, but I still did, I felt see a bit bad because then my dad would always be away and see...It was a bit surprising...right then. Just because then mom and dad would be happier (to the question why she did not care). No they weren’t really happy. No of course I didn’t feel very well. Yes they were hardly ever arguing”(G13 in Theta).

5.1.7 Childrens Perception Regarding the News of Divorce

In four of the six families, the parents tell the children together that they can no longer live together. However, the mother is the bearer of bad news in the Beta and Gamma families. Most of the children, except for the Gamma sisters and Theta B13, did not expect the news. Either the fathers had already moved out (Beta, Gamma) or were preparing to move out when the children were told. Thus, the length of time the children had to prepare themselves for the divorce was next to none.

5.2 Coping

At this point, we will examine the affects the children felt the divorce had on their lives, what support they received and how they adapted to new situations. It seems that individuals vary in ability to adapt to changes and survive crisis. As stated earlier, people create their personality and develop the self from connections with those closest to them, their environment and society. Mead goes a step further than other theorists do when it comes to interaction. Blumer (1969) writes about Mead that in addition to our interaction with the environment, we interact with ourselves internally; i.e. how we see ourselves and how we think others perceive us. According

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to this mechanism, a child's opportunities can be hidden when asking about their ability to survive a difficult situation and adapt:

"Through interaction with himself, the human being may judge, analyze, and evaluate the things he has designated to himself. And by continuing to interact with himself he may plan and organize his action with regard to what he has designated and evaluated. In short, the possession of a self provides the human being with a mechanism of self-interaction with which to meet the world – a mechanism that is used in forming and guiding his conduct" (Blumer, 1969, p. 62).

5.2.1 Coping in the Alpha Family.

The outside influences are financial in nature as described by B15 and B12, while inside influences lead to thoughts of life and existence for B15. B12 is still sad even though it has been 4 years since the divorce. The various problems faced by G17 are according to her both related to the divorce and being a teenager. It is difficult to assert whether the complex problems associated with G17 is related entirely to the divorce, or whether other factors were at work. However, it is most likely that the divorce had considerable impact.

"Umm well during those years I changed into some...I always did well in school and then all of the sudden I stopped going and cut classes sometimes and stopped studying at home. It was like when I was fourteen and had anorexia and stopped eating and went to the psychologist and then I went to the Parents House. I tried a few times to commit suicide and went once to the emergency room and talked to a psychiatrist and after that I went a psychologist and been there since". (G17 in Alpha).

"There weren't very many changes. I started thinking more about life and existence for instance about bullying. You worked harder then found out that there was no money...I just started saving and actually still do". (B15 in Alpha).

"Some things are maddening...oh...not having money, we haven't been able to do what we want to. I just feel mainly that I'm sadder today; maybe not right now...you just try to be tough. Yes I was sad for a long time". (B12 in Alpha)

The amount of support given to the children varies. G17 received professional help, which continues today. She also received a lot of help and understanding from her friends. B12 went to the school counselor, but would have liked to receive help in understanding what homosexuality is. B15 described informal help in the form of talking to his parents or friend.

"My friends supported me a lot and talked to me and have always stood by me. What has also helped me is that I've been quite open and told people...I wasn't embarrassed or anything (talking about her father's homosexuality)". (G17 in Alpha).

"No I've been able to get through this, but dad and mom could have used some help". (B15 in Alpha)

"Yes I talked to dad and mom and actually my friend...and you see when you can get it out its much better...then you got rid of it. Yes I think like it would be better to get some type of help...even if you don't want to at first but then...well maybe talk about it and see accept help". (B15 in Alpha)

"I would have liked to have had help in understanding what it is (homosexuality). Yes I went and talked to the school counselor. When I am sad there is only one thing I do – computers". (B12 in Alpha)

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The older siblings seemed able to acclimate quickly to the new circumstances and to share their parents' happiness.

"Of course I accepted the divorce in somehow right away because in my childhood I never saw my dad at home...he was always working. School has been going really well...yeah I have done really well during tests see. I don't know, I sometimes fell very guilty about eating see...its still in my brain see...and you know you think like you have to reward yourself for your ability to eat just one piece of bread a day and just drink water...then I am happy...if I eat very little" (G17 in Alpha).

"It took a few months (to get over it) ...and see they (the parents) are both so very happy. Yeah, they actually don't fight now. School has gone well...tests are coming up. It's just like anything else...everyone talks about life crisis ...there are always some bad patches and you just have to get through them. I think there is a reason for everything" (B15 in Alpha).

B12 still does not accept the divorce but tries to bite his tongue. The children emphasize their parents' friendship. G17 seems to accept her father's homosexuality and is happy with the amount of understanding her friends have shown, while B15 never mentions that his father is homosexual. When asked why his parents divorced he says, *"I don't really think about it see"*. However, the youngest brother talks much about it and cannot seem to accept homosexuality or understand what it is. He does not tell his friends about it,

"I haven't told anyone about it, yeah I tell my friends-when they see the man my father is with- I actually tell them that he is his friend". (B12 in Alpha)

He says he does not want to be homosexual and it is still very difficult for him to acknowledge that his father's partner is a man.

"No, when I saw him kiss dad I left - period". (B12 in Alpha)

One can view the child as a victim, object of the divorce process, since they did not make any decisions concerning the divorce, or have any influence on the changes that it created. However, the parents are the doers or subject. The children's' role is built mainly on trying to influence the situation; e.g. "biting my tongue" like B12 does or "eating the smallest amount" as B17 does; becoming victims as described by Mead regarding the interaction between the subjective and objective in our social world (Manson, 1995). The children have their own way to adapt; ways that can vary in efficacy. Thus, they are not just victims but can actively have an effect on themselves and their environment.

In this family the mother wants the father to take more initiative in connection with his children, yet he is happy with the cooperation of the parents although he'd like to have his children more often. The children see their parents as friends and it is obvious that this is very important to them.

5.2.2 Coping in the Beta Family

B17 lives with his mother, but lived with his father for approximately half a year after the divorce, When I asked B17 what influence his parents divorce had on him he told me about the *"dead silence"* when he comes home from school and his father no longer there.

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"I often called him see and asked him were he was when he wasn't at home...I was naturally used to him sleeping when I came home from school (he drove a taxi at night) but then you would only hear dead silence...and I didn't know where he was". (B17 in Beta)

B17 did not receive any professional help and tried to work things out on his own. Most helpful was his father allowing him to keep in touch whenever he wanted.

"Hmm...Naturally it would have been easier if we got help...yet not really see I actually thought it was better to deal with it on my own...but naturally it might have been better to have someone help me with it. What helped me the most? I really don't know...I think it was actually dad letting me talk to him more often see". . (B17 in Beta)

B17's wishes focus mainly on the father. He would like to talk to him more, "get things out in the open" but they usually talk about other things.

B17 felt it was helpful to be with his friends and have plenty to do.

He tries to see the positive side of the divorce,"

"...maybe I would have never met so many people if they hadn't divorced". (B17 in Beta).

Silence is an ongoing theme in the Beta family. The parents have not spoken since the divorce. B17 and his older sister have never spoken about it either. B17 has a strong experience of the silence once the father left. It is so strong that he can hear it. He wants to talk more about the divorce, especially with his father but doesn't trust himself to open up the topic.

It seems that B17 has been the one to take care of visitation and been the one to initiate contact with his father. His life evolves around keeping his father's love and it is obvious that his father is his role model. He wants to be like his father.

In Iceland, it seems that fathers often do not see how large their role is in their child's lives, especially the boys. In Bente and Gunnar Öberg (1992) the importance of the father is discussed. They state that although the child can receive sufficient love and care from a good mother they also need affection from the other person that is part of them, the father. The mother is not enough when it comes to "us boys":

Sw: "Och även om barnet försättningsvis får sina behov av kärlek och omsorg tillfredsställda av en god och omvårdande mor, behöver det i alla fall den andra, den som det också är en del av – pappa. Ingen som har sett den beundran en femårs pojke riktar mot sin far kan ett ögonblick sväva i tvivelsmål om att pappan är en oumbärlig person för honom. Vi grabbar känslan – där dugar inte morsan" (Öberg, 1992, p.104).

5.2.3 Coping in the Gamma Family

Both sisters were positive in regards to the divorce. This is understandable because the situation had been difficult before hand.

The influences or effects they experienced were that they had to visit their father elsewhere. Both sisters talk about the changes that occurred after the divorce in a positive light. They have been happy to meet the children they have met through their parent's new relationships and thought it was all right to change schools and meet new friends.

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“Yes we went to his house just the weekend after... he (the father) just asked if it was all right or something. I just spoke to my girlfriends about this. And my grandfather and grandma also helped ...I got over it really quickly”. (G13 in Gamma)

“Yes my dad has got a girlfriend that has two kids...the boy is six years old but the girl is going to be eleven Yes and then my mom got a boyfriend that lives here now...that was approximately one year ago”. “I think it is just great. He was in contact...yes he had one girl. She is same age as I am...thirteen years old. We get along fine” (G13 in Gamma)

“I was really quick to get over it”. (G10 in Gamma)

Following the sisters' interview consideration was taken to review whether the sisters were voicing their real opinion or only saying what the mother wanted. As stated earlier, family loyalty is important, but it can sometimes become the enemy and cause emotional stress and strain (Boszormenyi-Nagy, Ivan, 1973).

The sister's wishes are interesting. The older sister wants a united family on a big day in her life (her confirmation) and she worried that this would be impossible. In spite of everything the little sister wishes that it had never happened and that her mother and father were still together.

They did not receive any professional help but friends and grandparents offered them support. The parents never speak together and communication is always done through the oldest.

“I don't know...either mom does it or I talk to dad”. “It has been ok but sometimes I feel like a messenger or something like that”. (G13 in Gamma)

5.2.4 Coping in the Delta Family

The outside effects of the divorce were that G13 had to move from a large house into an apartment. She also had to let her pets go because they were not welcome in the apartment building.

She describes positive effects of the divorce because she sees her father more often and his family.

“My dad was always at sea...it didn't change that much...I probably saw him more...I saw him once a month before...I saw him more when they got divorced because he stopped going out to sea”(G13 in Delta).

She does not recall having to look for support. She discussed the divorce a little with her friends who also had the same experience.

“No not that I remember (about if she would have wanted some support) – I talked a little bit to my girlfriends, but not much” (G13 in Delta)..

Her wishes center on childhood memories when she believed that nothing like this would happen to her.

“No, but see when I was little you know we maybe talked about this you know, that it would never happen...our dad and mom would never divorce or something see...see it happens in films” (G13 in Delta).

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G13 believes she was quick in adapting (around six months). She is happy visiting her father when she sees her other sisters and she cannot wait for the birth of her newest sibling carried by her mother. She believes that she has been luckier than most children have. In addition, she is doing well socially.

“When my dad had moved out, you know, that was see just before Christmas...see then I maybe got over it again...it sucked a bit see when I didn't live with my dad and when my dad left...it was a bit different and it took a bit of a time to get over it. I think I got over it see sometime after Christmas. Yes I think I have been luckier than some kids”. (G13 in Delta)

5.2.5 Coping in the Eta Family

The divorce surprised both siblings but B14 had some notion that everything was not right. He says during the interview:

“See it was quite a lot...there was unhappiness in the house see”. (B14 in Eta)

And later he said:

“They weren't hugging see or saying bye or something like that...oh you know that love you understand or happiness”. (B14 in Eta)

Both children believe that this has had a great effect on them. B14 feels he has landed right in the middle of a bad divorce, pointing out his father's continuing anger and it seems difficult for the children to handle their father's anger. On the other hand, he is very happy to be in the same neighborhood and school still.

“I almost quit during the divorce there. Do you know that I didn't learn anything in school and I cut school... and when I did go to school I was just laid my head on the desk and just ripped up all the tests and everything see and was just crazy. The divorce had such an effect...there are bad divorces and good divorces and I think I landed in a bad one. After these fore years I can say see that dad hasn't gotten over moms decision or you understand that mom wanted a divorce understand. To day it is the same school and same neighborhood. No then it would have been terrible” (if he would have had to change schools and friends).(B14 in Eta).

G12 found moving very difficult. She grieves when her mother tells her that she has to move. She was playing with her girlfriend and is happy when her mother comes in and tells her,

“Hey, we're going to move there and points out the window and I just said ok and kept playing and then I thought about it later that evening and was very sad that we were moving...so looked more at the house and such and oh no I don't really want to move”. (G12 in Eta).

The most difficult part of the divorce was the move and that the parents were no longer friends according to G12. The best part was meeting the family of his father's new girlfriend.

“Yes see oh I don't know – we had to move of course and I really liked it were we were. But it was good that we didn't have to change schools or nothing like that. The hardest thing was moving and that they were not friends” G12 in Eta).

I was a couple of months getting used to moving. But still today when I walk past this house...I'm still really angry at the people that live there...I don't know what they have

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done . Meeting my step's family, my dad's girlfriend was the positive part". (G12 in Eta)

B14 experiences a lot of support from family and friends and he thinks he has a good family. He received professional help in the beginning and sees a psychologist toady which he finds useful. His main interest, swimming helps him a lot:

"There is so much social lives through swimming see...It mainly helped a lot And my friends and also my brother that is 24 years old now...he spoke to me a lot and see, I went to him a lot. I went to the psychologist five or six times that time and now I see a sports psychologist. And dad went with me, my sister and my big brother to a family meeting...it was really stiff see...I don't know if it did any good or not. My whole family you understand was very helpful see they spoke to me in the bedroom and spoke to me for hours calming me down. Yes there was everyone...I have a really good family understand" (B14 in Eta).

G12 says most of her help came from her mother and older brother. Yet most of the support came from her mother and G12 feels that they are very close.

"Yes just from my mom (got support)...yes and he was there, big brother, he consoled me when I had just found out about it all. I've only once gone to a school counselor in school...that was really short...I didn't go again see...it wasn't uncomfortable or nothing like that, I just didn't really need it I think Yes I went there once with my dad to some kind of a counselor, he had to talk to us kids about it. My mum talked to me a lot about it" (G12 in Eta).

For a long time B14 wished that his parents would get back together, but is realistic when he realized that it isn't possible. He hopes that his parents are happy and that they have no regrets.

"I am starting not to really care...I just have to keep on living life, see; I just need to carry on. I really miss the old house...it is really boring walking up the hill here. Yes I think it's the most positive thing about the divorce that my mom probably feels better now than she did in the marriage... Yes naturally it was bad but see I am just starting to live" (B14 in Eta).

G12's main wish is that the parents can be friends.

In interviews with the siblings an emotional pull was apparent that was related to their parents' difficult relationship. B14 says that he does not really care anymore. He just needs to go on with his life, but his sister has a more difficult time with the divorce and says,

"He wasn't happy that we (the siblings) would be with mom on Christmas eve...and I was afraid to tell him that I was going to be here (with mom).. I worried about Christmas...which isn't good see". (G12 in Eta)

This family most likely suffered from loyalty conflict, which affected the lives of the children. In the interviews it became obvious that the siblings often worried about the father's reactions; e.g. when visitations were changed or when the children chose to spend Christmas Eve with their mother. They also suffered their parents' arguments and loud phone calls.

"I can hear often in the evenings when I'm going to sleep I don't want to hear about it because he is maybe really angry...he is maybe talking to her and swearing and saying

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something bad (when the dad is talking on the phone to the mother). I hear it see and then the next day I'm going to his house but I don't show him, I don't want to when he has just been saying something like this. No we don't want to say who is better or nothing like that". (G12 in Eta)

Thus the 12 year old girl, who was eight at the time of divorce, had to experience the father's anger towards her mother. This causes her great anxiety and she does not want to have to choose between the two.

5.2.6 Coping in the Theta Family

The children found it most difficult to move because their friends didn't live in the same neighborhood as well as having a long distance to travel every day to school.

"We of course had to move so it's a bit longer to friends and something like that. Yes I think that it has been fewer changes than for others" (because the father lived over seas). (B14 in Theta)

B14 got support from his best friend but G13 talks about receiving support from her teacher and mother.

"I guess I just talked to my best friend or something, yes just told him about it. I no, you know didn't get any support or anything see...no. Yes or something like that...you know, you can't control anything like that...Am doing well in school but my friends are close to school" (he does not have any friends in the neighborhood). (B14 in Theta)

G13 still wishes that her parents were still married but claims that she adapted quite quickly. It is interesting that B14 accepts the situation on the grounds that one cannot control such things. There is very little communication between the parents in this family, but according to the mother they are not enemies.

"It was kind of the next time that I saw him (on the second visit to the father) that I was actually getting used to it, kind of after three months or so" (G13 in Theta).

The feeling of powerlessness seems to be the main thread throughout all the participants' experiences.

Appelberg et al. (1988) conducted a pilot study on the child's influence on their surroundings. They discuss power in the context of the states role towards the individual.

"It is the child that is protected by the adult and the adult protected by the state, the discussion of power has been about the relationship between the adults and citizens. Thus, the child has been left out of the definition of power" (Appelberg et al., 1988, p. 59).

This quote discusses the child's powerlessness in society. It is assumed that the adults are the child's representative and thus the children are not included in the issue.

5.3 The Children's wishes and Pearls of Wisdom

When the children were asked about their wishes for themselves or other children in similar circumstances they all agreed that it would be best if their parents could be friends or at least be able to talk to each other. They wished that the divorce never happened but quickly admitted that this wish is unrealistic. It was also interesting that the wishes reflected empathy for the parents, hope that the parents could be happy or not regret their choice to divorce. As these examples show, the wishes depend on the child's age and maturity.

"No, I don't have any wishes, but dad is obviously a married man and I just hope that they are happy" (G17 in Alpha).

... "hope everything goes well or you understand that there won't be a never ending war between them but I wish that they feel good since they did it and don't really regret it" (B14 in Eta).

"Yes, I just wish it wasn't the way that it is...I wish it was like it was before" (B12 in Alpha).

"No, but I would have wanted them not to argue and that they would still be together" (G10 in Gamma).

The twelve year old girl in the Eta family tells a story about her friend in order to relay her own wishes.

"Well, my girlfriend once suspected her father and mother were going to divorce .and you know she didn't want that and she was going to try to stop it by talking to her mother and father each by themselves. She told her mother like: Mom promise me you'll never get a divorce. And her mother said: Yes I'll promise, well I'll try really hard at least. And then she said: Yes, but mom if you can't promise will you promise never to be enemies? And that's what I would really have wanted" (G12 Eta family).

Pearls of wisdom refer to a certain speck of philosophy or view on life. It is interesting how sensitive children can be to their environment. G17 describes in an entertaining way how happy she is that society acknowledges homosexuality and how she experienced gay pride day in Reykjavik.

"Just like the gay-pride march the other day...a lot of people came to the parade and showed their respect. I was really proud on that day...I just wasn't sure what I should do see and just that there's nothing wrong being like this. It's their business. You can't change it" (G17 Alpha family)

The children put themselves in their parents' shoes and try to understand events and their parents' idleness after the fact.

"Well, if I had to say something to my children that we were going to divorce, me and my husband, then I would have no idea how to say it" (G13 Delta family).

The great feeling of lethargy is reflected in the following words:

"Yeah you know, its like you don't control anything when it comes to that...its just...I don't know, the adults decide everything" (G13 Theta family).

Loyalty conflict is described here as well as how to avoid it:

Themes of Interpretation: Analysis of Results

“Yeah, like this psychologist said see...when I am with dad ...we two aren't suppose to talk about mom and when I am with mom then I'm not supposed to talk about dad see...when I'm with mom then I'm with mom when I'm with dad then I'm with dad” (B14 Eta family).

6 Conclusion

As stated in the first chapter, the main purpose of this study was to form a picture of what happens in the child's world, from their perspective, when the parents divorce. During the interviews, an open-ended interview guide was used (see appendix B). The sample was virtually unknown, since a gatekeeper was used during the selection process and it was possible that some of the children might find it difficult to discuss the divorce. However, all the children were very diligent in answering the questions although their answers varied in depth, emotion, and personal opinion. Thus, all the questions were answered, while some answers were more detailed than others.

Due to the large age span, 10-17 years, it is natural that the results are more complex than they would be in a more homogenous group. Specialists in this field feel that the child's age and maturity is largely connected to the effects the divorce has on them (Benedek & Brown, 1995; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

In this current study the group may vary, but the two main factors remain; children and divorce.

In order to understand the children's observations, analysis emphasised their experience in light of the connections to their family, the connection to their environment, their perception and how they coped. Mead's theory on symbolic interaction was making use of in the analysis. Furthermore, the children were viewed from their place in society and their legal rights. We presently live in a world that is continually changing and today's children have experiences far from those of previous generations as Lars Dencik (1999) writes about. The children's experiences in this study varied and were complex, but there were some similarities.

When analysing children's perceptions and interpretations it becomes obvious how ill prepared most children are for this change. Although the Gamma sisters state that they are relieved because their parents were always arguing, the timing was still questionable. They were told only after their father had moved out. It would seem that parents drag their feet when it comes to telling their children the news, possibly wanting to protect the children or be sure that the divorce is definite. In addition, it seems that this event and the proceeding changes are rarely discussed following the divorce. The children's perception is that it is rarely discussed. Instead, they discuss the changes with friends to a varying extent. Most of the children (Alpha and Eta excluded) felt there was a lack of discussion. This brings to mind whether a connection exists between the amount of discussion within the family and how the children perceive the events. According to Mead it is the interpretation of events that is most important (Blumer, 1969). However, Blumer (1969) would like to take it a step further and define between *non symbolic interaction* and *symbolic interaction*. It is possible that the child reacts to the adults' action without interpreting it especially if communication is lacking.

The children's emotional responses range from anger, sorrow, sadness, fear and relief as well as experiencing loyalty, friendship, empathy, and love. They worry about the upcoming changes. They contemplate whether they have to move, change schools, move away from friends etc. The children's powerlessness echoed throughout the study; as if they were just pawns in the hands of fate.

Although the children seem almost powerless when it comes to divorce, their influence can be seen based on Mead's theories as stated earlier. We are not just interacting with other individuals and society. Mead sees the human being as an

Conclusion

organism having a self. In asserting that the human being has a self, Mead simply meant that the human being is an object to himself, can communicate with himself and act towards himself (Blumer, 1969).

Thus, the individual always has opportunities to influence circumstances although children can be seen as victims. When there is a lack of communication with those closest to us and a change or crisis is left un-discussed, a person could fill this need to some degree through interactions with their environment. If those interactions are not sufficient then the individual can look within as B15 in the Alpha family did. He began to think more about life and decided to begin saving money in light of the new situation. Mead's complex interaction mechanism can often describe how or why some people survive a setback and both mature and adapt to changes.

The families in the study varied in structure. The individuals within each family varied as well as communication and cultural patterns were unique. It is without a doubt that the family structure undergoes a complete change during divorce as seen in the figures in chapter 4. The parents no longer live together and the children often have to associate with new spouses and stepsiblings.

All the children interviewed experienced the father leaving the family home. On the other hand, external factors varied; i.e. move or change schools. Some children even express a sense of relief at not having to change schools or move away from friends (Eta and Theta). When it comes to support it is only in those instances that the child shows serious symptoms (G17 in Alpha) or strong emotional response (B14 in Eta) that a specialist is brought in. Their voices seem to be strong enough that help ensues.

Each family had its own internal theme, yet they all share a few similarities. The Alpha dealt with prejudice towards homosexuality. Beta B17 experienced dead silence and the parents' separation very strongly. Gamma G13 became a messenger and took on the adult's role of responsibility and cooperation. Her loyalty was towards the family and keeping it going. Delta G13 tries to see the positive in everything and is determined to do well in spite of the many changes. The Eta siblings find themselves in a loyalty crisis between the parents and the Theta siblings want to make the best of things like Delta G13.

Similarities between the participants were feeling powerless in the adult world. Additionally, they all are preoccupied with their parents' welfare and they wish that the parents could remain friends.

As stated earlier, the Children's Act (barnalög) ensures Icelandic children's general welfare, on behalf of both society and the parents. Nevertheless, who ensures that a child receives the necessary support they need when a family is dissolved; i.e. when parents no longer live together? Here in Iceland the divorce decree is primarily in the hands of the priest but in other Nordic countries specialists (divorce counsellors) issue the agreement. According to Icelandic legislation (37th article, no. 20/1992) the county official should offer individuals custody and visitation counselling. This service is only offered in instances when it is difficult for parties to come to an agreement; however, they are not mandated to accept the service. New legislation that was enacted on November 1, 2003 do not mention any specific responsibilities for cohabitating couples or spouses to participate in any form of counselling when a separation or divorce is immanent.

Since 1993, it has been mandated in Norway that spouses and cohabitating couples participate in divorce counselling where the child's best interest is emphasized. All couples that intend to separate are mandated (Odd Arne Tjersland, 1992). The

Conclusion

emphasis varies greatly between these two countries. On the one hand, there is the duty and the other the opportunity to participate in counselling.

The main conclusion is that children are often left alone when the parents divorce. In Iceland the legal rights of the child in ensuring their welfare during a divorce is lacking. They are forgotten during the divorce process. Here is where society needs to intervene and legally ensure the individual right to counselling that emphasizes the child's needs and welfare.

I would like to end this report on a quote for the 12 year old boy in the Alpha family in which he clearly and simply states that which most children would agree with:

"The perfect marriage is to love each other and YOUR CHILDREN TOO. Yeah, especially the children want the marriage to last". (B12 Alpha family).

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Appendix A – Information for Priests

Information for priests

Study of the effects of parental divorce on children aged 12-18 years.

The goal of this study is to inform us about how children experience their parent's divorce.

The research design used is qualitative and data will be gathered by interviewing participants who have had the common life experience of parental divorce. This will provide an in-depth view of the child's experience.

The time elapsed from divorce, or the end of cohabitation, must be at least two years, but no more than three years.

Parental consent is required (written) and of course the child's or adolescent's assent to participate.

All data will be confidential. No identifying data will be used in reporting results, and data will not be marked in any way that can identify participants. All identifying data will be destroyed at the end of the study. This entails erasing tape recordings that will be used in gathering data.

The research project is part of my studies towards a Masters degree in social work at the University of Lund, Sweden.

Reykjavik, 2002-05-14

Rannveig Guðmundsdóttir
Furuhjalli 16,
200 Kópavogur
Telephone: 698 9356

Appendix B – Information for Parents

Information about the study on how children/adolescents experience their parent's divorce.

Dear Parents/Children!

While thanking you for your positive response to my telephone call I would like to use this opportunity to elaborate on the proposed study.

The research project is part of my studies towards a Masters degree in social work at the University of Lund, Sweden.

Parental consent is needed for children to participate. Their participation is necessary for this study to be completed and is much appreciated.

The main goals of the study are as follows:

To gain access to how a child experiences their parent's divorce.

To assess how divorce may affect a child's life, by listening to the child's point of view.

Hopefully this knowledge will be useful in informing professionals as well as parents on how we can better meet the needs of and support children who are experiencing the divorce of their parents.

To gather information, I intend to interview children that have experienced the divorce of their parents. In addition, I am interested in asking parents to answer a few questions (by telephone) regarding custody and parental cooperation.

All data will be confidential. No identifying data will be used in reporting results, and data will not be marked in any way that can identify participants. All identifying data will be destroyed at the end of the study. This entails erasing tape recordings that will be used in gathering data.

Enclosed is a sample of the questions/topics that I am interested in discussing with participants.

Best regards,

Rannveig Guðmundsdóttir, Social Worker

Furuhjalla 16, 200 Kópavogur,

mobile: 698 9356

Appendix C – Interview Guidance

Your story about your parents divorce.

Interview Guidance

1. *I want to ask you to tell me your story about your parents divorce.*

2. *What was your experience at that time according to:*
 - a. How you were told?
 - b. What kind of feelings and thoughts were in your mind at the time you got the news and in the time to come?

3. *How has the divorce affected your life in general?*
 - a. Have there been any changes in your relationship with your family members?
 - b. What about changes in your environment (where you live, school, friendship, interests etc.)?

4. *Can you remember anything you would have liked to have support with that you did not get in this period of your life?*

5. *Do you have any wishes for your self or for other kids that have experienced the same kind of events in their life?*

6. *Is there anything you want to tell me at the end of this interview?*

Appendix D - Survey

(questions Via telephone for the parents)

- 1. Can you tell me briefly about your divorce?**
 - a) Arrangement of custody.**
 - b) Your cooperation as parents.**
- 2. Would you like to make any changes to the arrangements you have today?**