

Fall 2012

# Sudden, Unexpected Divorce: A Family Systems Perspective on the Meanings Parents Make of the Event

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SUDDEN, UNEXPECTED DIVORCE:  
A FAMILY SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON THE MEANINGS PARENTS MAKE OF  
THE EVENT

BY

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Seton Hall University

2012

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES  
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## Abstract

This research was focused on the meanings that parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce make of the events. Data were acquired through semistructured interviews that were conducted with eight parents from a Northeast U.S. suburban area who had experienced sudden endings of their marriages. The researcher utilized a phenomenological research design to guide analyses and development of patterns and themes that were revealed through the participants' narratives. A contextual understanding of family-systems theory, research on divorce, literature on sudden, unexpected events, ambiguous loss, shattered assumptions, and a meaning-making process through deconstruction and reconstruction guided this study.

All of the participants believed they were married forever. Five of the participants described severe reactions they had upon ultimately learning that their spouses were involved in duplicitous relationships. Betrayal was an added component to their pile-up of losses in traumatic endings to their sudden, unexpected divorces. All participants' narratives revealed a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction as they tried to make meanings out of endings that seemed to make no sense at all. All of the participants whose marriages ended in sudden, unexpected divorces experienced a pile-up of losses associated with the sudden endings of their marriages. These included divorces that were unilaterally imposed by one partner with an absence of the other partner being part of the decision-making process and abandonment issues connected to divorce that was unilaterally imposed by one partner. A sixth participant knowingly "accommodated" her husband's substance abuse and was shattered when, despite her willingness to look the other way, her spouse unexpectedly

ended the marriage anyway. A seventh participant intensified his spiritual life as a path toward a more vibrant and loving marriage. His spirituality was used against him as his wife sought divorce. An eighth participant was shocked and devastated as well, moving from “It made no sense at all” to “Looking back, it makes all the sense in the world.” Results revealed that all participants suffered losses inherent from abandonment. Because of close family ties that participants described in marriages that they believed would last forever, traumatic endings had ripple effects on both the participants and their children. Participants appeared stronger through verbalizing detailed, subjective meanings of their experiences through narrative processes of the interviews. Their greatest motivation to “live – while simultaneously dying” was their children. Each of the participants reported satisfying, loving relationships with each of their children. All participants cited the roles of family and friends as supports that were central to their lives during traumatic divorce endings. Strong faith and a sense of spirituality were cited by seven of the participants as key to helping them survive their many losses.

This research points to new understandings of divorce vis-à-vis traumatic reactions. Based on participants’ interviews, it would appear that the literature on trauma, loss, bereavement, sudden endings, and meaning-making in the face of loss provides more fertile areas to draw on in understanding complexities inherent in divorce that is traumatic than is the research on divorce.

Clinical implications include therapists asking divorce clients what divorce losses represent to them, including assessing levels of trauma, feelings of shame, victimization or humiliation, and issues that may be blocking their capacities to grieve.

## Acknowledgements

*This is the day that the Lord had made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.  
(Psalm 118:24)*

First and foremost, I give thanks to God. Without His love and guidance, I would not be where I am in my life.

To my children – Robert, Christopher, Elisabeth, and Jennifer – for your love and belief in me. From when you were so young, my education was a part of your life. You were most patient. While we were not much of a sports family, our ability to communicate and say what we mean became our alternate treasure. How we evolved into the family we are only God knows, but what amazes me most is that not one of us would have changed the journey even if we could. As I watched you grow and evolve into the loving, giving people that you are, I understood more fully the prayer of St. Augustine, “Faith is to believe what we cannot see. And the reward of that faith is to see what we believed.”

To my dear in-law children – Mary-Ellen, Kelly, Tom, and Gregg – each of you has made our family complete. Our relationships mean more to me than you could ever know. Your love and belief in me are part of me. I cherish being another mother to all of you. Our collective excitement at times of our get-togethers brings me joy and makes us the family that we are. Put all of the children into the mix, and we know just how blessed we are! We truly are the “wind beneath each other’s wings.”

To my grandchildren – Meghan, Bobby, Erin-Mary, Shane, Ethan, Samantha, Katelyn, Gabriella and Cooper – you are lights in my life. You are wonderful children who have made our family complete. The love each of you shares with me has helped support me to finish this degree. I learn so much from each of you.

To my stepdad – Vinny – Yes, “that paper” is finally complete! Your love, pride, and support have always meant the world to me. Now we can go out and celebrate!

To my dear friends – Gina and John – The day that you took my four and put them with your six, I knew that we were family! The support you gave me in the early years will never be forgotten. I would not have been able to pursue my education without you – both the physical and emotional support were and are treasured.

To my former spouse, long-passed, with gratitude for the early years and deep family roots that ultimately supported my transformation and an ability to see with fresh eyes.

To my dissertation committee -- Dr. Robert Massey, Mentor - your commitment to my thesis will always be appreciated. Your value for editorial excellence taught me a lot and will long be remembered. Dr. Ben Beitin – your leadership and guidance through the research process helped in so many ways. I will always be grateful to you for your help. Dr. Sharon Massey – your interest and commitment to my thesis topic was so helpful. Your input has been invaluable. Dr. Henry Schreitmuller – your long-term commitment to me in the completion of this Ph.D. means a lot. Dr. Wesley Matsui – although no longer on my committee, your role in making my thesis more culturally sensitive is greatly appreciated.

To the participants – In spite of all your pain, you shared your stories so willingly and openly. Your participation in this study has enhanced knowledge of divorce and sudden, unexpected events for the clinical community in rich and meaningful ways. May your lives be blessed as you take your families forward!

“The gift of hope is as big a gift as the gift of life itself.”

-Vaclav Havel

## Dedication

In memory of my Mom and Dad

Mom, your warm and loving Italian heart and Dad, your Polish strength and determination were the best gifts you ever could have given me. You told me I could do anything I set my mind to, and you were so right! Our family, founded on deep ethnic roots, faith-filled traditions, and strong grandparent presence, became an embedded multi-generational model that came alive as I guided my own family forward. The light of your love guides me, always.



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## Chapter I

### *Introduction*

Divorce has been written about extensively as a highly stressful life event (Ahrons, 1999; Becvar, 2006; Emery, 2004; Figley, 1989; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987, 1997; Pam & Pearson, 1998; Wallerstein, 2000). In contrast with the almost 90% of children who lived with two biological parents in the 1960s, divorce statistics in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that only 40% of children lived with two biological parents (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1999). Approximately 45 percent of all first marriages in the United States end in divorce (Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997, cited in Ahrons, 1999). Demographers predict that 40 to 60 percent of all current marriages will eventually deteriorate to the point of divorce (Ahrons, 1999).

Divorce, it appears, is encountered by approximately 50% of couples who marry and involves their children. More than 1 million children experience parental divorce every year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998, cited in Amato, 2000) with 52% of all divorcing couples having at least one child under 6 years of age (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1995, cited in Pett, Turner, Wampold, & Vaughan-Cole, 1999). Young children are more likely to experience their parents' divorce than are older children because most divorces occur early in marriages (Emery & Coiro, 1997). On the average, children whose parents divorce fall into the two-and-one-half to six-year age range at the time of divorce (Furstenberg, Peterson, Nord, & Zill, cited in Emery & Coiro, 1997; Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). One or both parents typically remarry after divorce, and about 60% of second marriages also end in divorce (Emery & Coiro, 1997). Therefore, it is likely that large numbers of adults and their children will experience divorce multiple times

before the children are old enough to leave home (Pett, Turner, Wampold, & Vaughan-Cole, 1999).

From legal and social-status perspectives, divorce is an event that moves individuals from being married to being single (Ahrons, 1999). From a family-systems perspective, however, contemporary researchers recognize divorce as a multidimensional process of family change (Ahrons, 1999, Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; 1997). Most contemporary researchers view divorce from a family-systems, developmental-family-life-cycle perspective in which each family member is seen as affected by the divorce process as well as by each other's reactions to the divorce (Ahrons, 1999; Emery, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Rice & Rice, 1985).

Ahrons (1999) noted that family transitions are turning points, uncomfortable periods that signal the ending of familiar experiences while at the same time signifying the beginning of unknown situations. It is Ahrons' perspective that during transitional times families are more personally vulnerable but, paradoxically, these are also times when personal growth is most likely to occur. Unlike other expected transitions in the life cycle, Ahrons noted that divorce can occur at any time and has a greater potential than other life-cycle transitions to cause disequilibrium that can result in debilitating crisis.

Clapp (2000) reported specifically on the loss and turbulent emotions that can accompany divorce.

Divorcing men and women are often astounded by the extent of their losses. The marriage that had been an important part of life at one time is now gone. So is [*sic*] a lifestyle, future plans, a chunk of one's identity, and perhaps a home, financial security, free access to children, and shared friendships. For many, the massive losses create a

feeling of rootlessness -- a need to be connected. For many, the feelings of loss and unconnectedness are entangled with a gnawing sense of failure and dwindling feelings of self-worth. Lives are further complicated by turbulent and conflicting emotions. Men and women who are filled with bitterness, resentment, and anger may suddenly feel stunned by surges of love and yearning for their former partners. Studies suggest that divorce requires more readjustment and reorganization than any other stressful life event in our society, except for the death of a spouse. Few divorcing men and women are prepared for the extent to which their lives are disrupted. Of course, most know there will be major changes, but they usually underestimate them. For some the changes are staggering. (p. 5)

Echoing their findings that divorce causes significant practical and emotional readjustments, Carter & McGoldrick (1999) noted that short-term distress is normal even when it is severe. They reported that, just as in other forms of family crisis, including death or serious illness, the key that determines whether the crisis of divorce is transitional or has permanent, crippling impact is whether it is handled in an emotionally adequate way within the family system. Siegel (2001) and Siegel and Hartzell (2004) noted the importance of parental discussion of their own and the children's emotions related to challenging or traumatic situations when they are involved in joint problem-solving. Handling divorce in an adequate way within the family system would seem to imply one's ability to nurture and support oneself and one's children through the process, creating a balance that buffers both risk and protective factors. Fundamental as this task may be, it may likely be one of life's greatest challenges for those parents who themselves are struggling through the disorganization and chaos of sudden, unexpected divorce. Pryor & Rodgers (2001) reported that these changes are usually not at all

anticipated or wanted by children. Divorce is ranked at the top of the list of stressful life events as all of the normal coping mechanisms are taxed by complex personal and familial change (Ahrns, 1999).

Significantly, divorce and separation are rarely matters of mutual decision (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; Kelly, 1982, 2005). Recent statistics indicate that in only about 25% of all divorces do both partners want the termination of the relationship (Kelly, 2005). Noting the lack of mutuality in a decision-making process to end the marriage, sudden, unexpected divorce was described as one in which a husband or wife suddenly packs his or her bags, moves out, employs a lawyer to handle all legal responsibilities, and sets into motion a process likely to cause severe damage to him or herself and the family (Oakland, 1984; Spanier & Thompson, 1981). Pam and Pearson (1998) noted that the most typical form of divorce involves an acrimonious separation imposed unilaterally by one partner over the protests of another. One of the spouses in this type of divorce may experience lack of control, lack of preparation, emotional and/or physical abandonment, and feelings and fears of overwhelming intensity (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Becvar, 2006; Hoge, 2002; Pam & Pearson, 1998; Weiss, 1975.) “Not having the courage or consideration to discuss their [*sic*] intentions or to be present when the unsuspecting spouse becomes aware of the impending breakup makes the impact of the mate’s ‘disappearance’ even more devastating” (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987, p. 48).

Clapp (2000) and Ahrns (1999) observed that those who leave the marriage and those who are left have very different feelings. Ahrns noted that the leaver has the advantage of having wrestled with his or her emotions, has started grieving, and has already begun detaching from the relationship. The person being left, on the other hand, is perceived to be the victim.



This person's immediate reactions range from disbelief and shock to outrage and despair. The partners have unequal power at this point. The person being left is more vulnerable. Having had no time to prepare – to adapt to the overwhelming threat – the one being left is more likely to experience crisis at this point. (p. 387)

Ahrons (1999) further contended that abrupt departures usually create severe crises for those left behind.

It's the ultimate rejection – abandonment. The abandonment leaves one feeling totally helpless and frequently culminates in a severe, debilitating family crisis. . . . Abandoned children regress, get depressed, or act out. The rejection is too great and too sudden to cope with. (p. 389)

Thompson and Amato (1999) reported that mothers, fathers, and children are each changed by the divorce experiences but greatest concern is focused on the effects divorce has on children. Children are least responsible for the upheaval they go through when their parents part and are most vulnerable to the emotional pains and other difficulties that accompany the end of the marriage. They are likely to be least accepting of the loss of relationships that divorce can mean to them.

A child's perception of reality is formed within the family system (Everstine & Everstine, 1993). In the context of that system, the child learns whether the world is one of chaos or order, change or stability, violence or tenderness, deprivation or nurturance. What happens to the developing child for whom order changes to chaos, stability to instability (however transient), tenderness to irritability or abruptness, and nurturance to deprivation on the part of one or both parents? What impact does it make on a developing child's sense of self and of the world to

move from being the core of the parent's world to being an appendage or, worse yet, a burden?

As Everstine and Everstine (1993) pointed out,

When trauma strikes a child, the developing connection between internal process and external systems is disrupted . . . . At the very least, it will probably divert energy away from healthy development, into modes of survival and self-protection. (p. 113)

From a family-systems perspective we understand that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather as part of an emotional system (Satir, 1972). From a family-systems perspective, members have roles to play and rules that guide them. Family members are expected to respond to each other in a way that conforms to their roles, which is determined by agreements made among them over time. Within the boundaries of the system, patterns develop as family members' behavior is caused by, and causes, other family members to behave in predictable ways. From a family-systems perspective, families are seen as interconnected and interdependent; movement in one part of the system leads to movement in all parts of the system (Bowen, 1976; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; Nichols, 1984).

#### *Statement of the problem*

Although divorce in the United States is a frequently practiced, socially acceptable process which many authors label a traumatic event, little is known about what constitutes the trauma in divorce for adults and children in millions of families experiencing divorce each year. In view of the fact that approximately half of today's children who are born to married parents will experience their parents' divorces and that young children are more likely to experience their parents' divorces than older children (Emery & Coiro, 1998), there is a clinical need to understand more about what aspects of divorce may make it traumatic both for parents and for

children. What are the specific hardships sudden, unexpected divorce causes parents and children? What meaning do they make of the event as they go through it? What helps them to cope as they go through the experiences? Although a number of authors have identified sudden, unexpected divorce as a traumatic process or catastrophic event (Ahrons, 1999; Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Figley, 1989; Hoge, 2002; Pam & Pearson, 1998; Sprenkle & Cyrus, 1983), there is a paucity of research available outlining the salient features of this, or any other specific type of divorce. For purposes of this research, *sudden, unexpected divorce* is defined as divorce that is unilaterally decided on by one spouse over the protests of the other, which leads to major rejection for one spouse for which there was no warning or preparation, nor other option (Becvar, 2006; Pam & Pearson, 1998).

Significantly, unpreparedness and suddenness of an event are two variables taken into consideration when assessing subjective levels of trauma in Criteria A, DSM-IV-TR (2000) in making a diagnosis for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), for those experiencing events that are unexpected. One must consider the possibility that for parents and children who are suddenly confronted with the possible disorganization, chaos, and loss connected with sudden, unexpected divorce, subjective levels of stress may play a significant role in the family's process of reorganization.

Trauma involves personal experiences of unpleasant, shocking events that may range from natural disasters to human-made cruelty (Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 1998). *Traumatic stress* was defined by Figley (1988) as "the immediate and long-term psychosocial consequences of highly stressful events and the factors which affect those consequences" (p. 3). A traumatized family is one viewed as struggling to recover from, or cope with, an injury to the family system (Figley, 1989). Figley noted that the injury could range from a seemingly small incident that

would be minor to some family members, to a death or an extraordinary event that affected one or more family members. What is most critical is the fact that trauma experienced by one family member has the potential to affect all family members. Figley defined *traumatized families* as those who were exposed to a stressor that resulted in unwanted disruptions in their life routine. . . the most critical issue is the beliefs, points of view, perceptions, frames of reference, or cognitive appraisals of family members – both separately and collectively. (p. 5)

Figley's (1989) definition of traumatized families encompasses a systemic perspective; that is, that whatever sense and meaning each person in the family makes of the event might affect the entire family system. Siegel's (2001) research confirms this. Dreman (1991) observed that human-made traumatic events, like divorce, that are not amicably agreed to by both partners, may be even more emotionally devastating than natural disasters like earthquakes since there is culpability and guilt involved. Everstine and Everstine (1993) reported that traumatic events of human intention are among the most difficult to recover from because they raise complicated social-psychological issues. Traumatic events caused by trusted persons are more powerful than those inflicted by strangers because they call into question the victim's ability to trust as well as concern about one's competence in choosing people who are safe to invest trust in.

Research highlights a delicate interplay between two aspects of a broken relationship. On the one hand, researchers (Freud, 1917/1957; Horowitz, 1990; Mikulincer & Florian, 1996; Rosenblatt, 1996, cited in Field, Nichols, Holen, & Horowitz, 1999) emphasized that successful adjustment to loss requires the relinquishing of goals associated with prior attachment and constructing new meanings in life. From Bowlby's (1988) frame of reference on attachment and loss, sudden, unexpected divorce may be construed as a trauma that occurs within the context of

what has been primary attachment (spousal and parent-child) relationships for all parties concerned. It, thus, involves a sense of loss of what was previously considered a secure base. Siegel (2001) drew on Bowlby's work. This process requires working through the implications of the loss and reconstructing one's identity as a single person. Stated differently, the goal is to disconnect from the relationship. On the other hand, because the loss for the bereaved is so painful, the likelihood exists that the one who is left will engage in cognitive efforts to maintain a sense of connection to the spouse so as to not experience the emptiness that disconnecting from the relationship brings (Silverman & Klass, 1996). In cases in which trauma and grief reactions co-occur; that is, when there has been a traumatic event and a simultaneous loss, researchers have contended that it is first necessary to deal with the traumatic event, which may block grief, before grieving can be accomplished (Raphael, Middleton, Martinek, & Misso, 1993). This research had meaningful implications when considering the struggle and dilemma faced by parents and children encountering sudden, unexpected divorce. Specifically, the question arises as to what are the complications and hazards for adults and children who may have become traumatized by the sudden, overwhelming aspects of divorce, if they then feel stuck and unable to grieve and mourn their losses in order to get beyond them?

#### *Purpose of the study*

A thorough review of the clinical and research literature revealed a lack of research detailing experiences of this type of divorce, although that same review revealed that divorce and separation are rarely matters of mutual decision (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; Kelly, 1982; 2005). In fact, recent statistics indicate that in only about 25% of all divorces do both partners want the termination of the relationship (Kelly, 2005). In undertaking this research, I had an interest in understanding the subjective descriptions and meanings that divorcing parents who have gone

through the experience place on the event. It was my hope that, through phenomenological research methodology, participants would benefit from hearing essential meanings they placed on their own divorce events. These meanings may help them gain greater understanding of their experiences. It was hoped that by understanding the meanings custodial parents make of this event, the parents themselves, marriage and family therapists, other mental-health clinicians, researchers, and policy makers will have a clearer picture of how the events unfold and impact abandoned custodial parents, children, and whole communities.

Most researchers take a life-course, risk-and-resiliency perspective when focusing on the effects of divorce (Emery & Coiro, 1997; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1998; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Pryor & Rodgers, 2001; Walsh, 1998). They recognized that divorce is one step in a number of different family transitions that affect family relationships and that children's adjustments are affected by events and experiences that occurred prior to, during, and after the divorce (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagen, 1998).

Kaslow and Schwartz (1997) noted that divorce has differential effects on adults and children. These vary according to age, personality, family relationships and alliances, religion, ethnicity, cultural background and attitudes, physical and mental health, socioeconomic status, resources, and other factors that contribute to the unique view of each individual and family caught up in the potential transitions evoked by divorce.

Kaslow and Schwartz (1987) observed certain commonalities experienced among those who divorce. These include stages of mourning and the uncoupling process, the need to create a new life-style and self-image, legal status changes that have effects on taxation and insurance, the management of finances, and other emotional impacts that accompany identity crises through a divorce. The authors pointed out that part of what makes divorce difficult for those

experiencing it stems from continued contact between the parties as they seek to resolve issues of finances, support, custody, visitation, and child-rearing as well as establishing new intimate relationships of their own.

Emery and Coiro (1997) reported that, from a developmental perspective, most children are greatly distressed by their parent's divorce in the short term, but are successful in coping with the challenges presented by divorce in the long term. These researchers clearly delineated the meaning of "resilience" as distinctly separate and apart from "invulnerability" (p. 36). Invulnerability implies little need for coping as, metaphorically, stressors do not dent the impenetrable psychic armor of the child. In contrast, the resilient child "is knocked down by the stress, but eventually gets up, bruised but not beaten" (p. 36). From a resilience perspective we acknowledge that children are capable of bouncing back while coping with divorce. However, some children are vulnerable and are not resilient in the face of multiple stressors associated with divorce. Regardless of children's psychological adaptations, many consequences of divorce are troubling, with even successful coping taking a psychological toll on the resilient children.

Children's reactions to their parents' divorces vary considerably, depending on a variety of factors including age, cognitions, developmental level, presence of siblings and their ages (or being an only child), suddenness of the separation, presence or absence of tension or abuse in the family prior to the divorce, depression and/or hostility on the part of the parents, and nature and degree of support by each parent (or perhaps grandparents) for the children (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997).

There appears to be some evidence that children are at greater risk to suffer from the divorce of parents in low-conflict marriages, while children from high-conflict marriages may benefit from their parents' divorce (Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Booth & Amato, 2001).

From a stress perspective this may be related to the fact that divorce represents an increase in stress for children in low-conflict marriages, whereas a decrease in stress has been noted for children after divorce in high-conflict marriages (Booth & Amato, 2001). Additionally, there are no studies of parents who seldom argue or disagree, yet end their marriages in divorce, a seemingly incongruous marital outcome that appears to occur fairly frequently (Amato & Booth, 1997). A question arises, therefore, whether marriages ending in sudden, unexpected divorce might represent a disproportionate number of low-conflict marriages versus high-conflict marriages.

Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) noted that, on average, children whose parents' divorce fall into the two-and-one-half to six-year age range at the time of divorce, at which age, developmentally, children have not yet mastered the task of object constancy or the ability to manipulate object representations. From a developmental perspective, these young-age children lack the mental flexibility to comprehend that the parent leaving or who moved out of the home will still see them. Other common reactions among younger children include feelings of self-blame, fears of abandonment, and longing for their parents to reunite (Emery & Coiro, 1997).

As stated previously, Carter and McGoldrick (1999) noted that the key that determines whether the crisis of divorce is transitional or has a permanent, crippling impact is whether it is handled in an emotionally adequate way within the family system. Because a child's perception of reality is formed within the family system, it is through the context of that system the child learns whether the world is one of chaos or order, change or stability, violence or tenderness, deprivation or nurturance (Everstine & Everstine, 1993). Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) also found that the children's adjustments are highly correlated with their parents' adjustments. "If the parents handle the grief and mourning associated with the separation well, do not malign the



other parent, and move on to recuperate and ‘survive the breakup,’ so, too, will the children” (p. 32).

Family-systems theory implies that individuals cannot be understood in isolation from one another but rather as part of an emotional system. From a family-systems perspective, members have roles to play and rules that guide them. Family members are expected to respond to each other in ways that conform to their roles, which are determined by agreements made among them over time. Within the boundaries of the system, patterns develop as family members’ behavior is prompted by, and influences, other family members to behave in predictable ways. From a family-systems perspective, families are seen as interconnected and interdependent, movement in one part of the system leads to movement in all parts of the system (Bowen, 1976; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; Nichols, 1984).

Carter and McGoldrick (1999) observed that families are comprised of people who share a history and a future. Family relationships with parents, siblings, and other family members change as families move through transitions in the family lifecycle. Boundaries shift, roles and rules may change, homeostatic balances may become upset. Carter and McGoldrick pointed out a consideration that seems relevant for families participating in this study; that is, families characteristically lack a time perspective when they are having problems. The present moment tends to become exaggerated and magnified as the family becomes immobilized or overwhelmed by the feelings of intensity felt at the moment. “They become fixed on a moment in the future that they dread or long for . . . . They lose the awareness that life means continual motion from the past into the future with a continual transformation of familial relationships” (p.4).

The purpose of this study was to acquire information about reactions to sudden, unexpected divorce. Combining theoretical knowledge based on divorce research as well as

research on the effects of sudden, unexpected events formed the basis for this study involving the perceptions of the experiences of parents who had recently experienced divorce that was entirely unexpected. Specifically, the participants in this research included parents who experienced sudden, unexpected divorce within the past six months to three years of their first and only marriages. Participant families consisted of parents whose marriages ended unexpectedly in divorce, who had minor children living in the family home. Questions that were researched included: What sense had the parent who was left made of the sudden leaving of one partner and parent? What was the family's experience of life before the divorce? What had been the family's experiences of life since the divorce? How had they been affected by the divorce? What had been the family's experiences -- emotionally, contextually, physically, financially, and spiritually since the divorce?

The research study was based on a qualitative research design.

Research that attempts to understand the meaning or nature of experiences of persons with problems such as chronic illness, addiction, divorce . . . lends itself to getting out into the field and finding out what people are doing and thinking. (Strauss & Corbin, p. 11.)

Qualitative methods can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known (Stern, 1980, cited in Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Little has been written or researched on the issue of sudden, unexpected divorce. The qualitative approach is helpful in obtaining intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to extract or learn about through quantitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Trauma reactions are event-specific. Helping persons to recover from traumatic events necessitates helping them understand the personal significance and meanings of the events (Everstine & Everstine, 1993).

Unlike the quantitative researcher, the naturalist, or qualitative researcher, does not strive for a random sample, but rather seeks out a purposeful or criterion-based sample. "Naturalistic sampling is very different from conventional sampling. It is based on informational, not statistical, considerations. Its purpose is to maximize information, not facilitate generalization" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). The phenomenological approach and qualitative research design used in this study lent themselves to small-sample studies that required in-depth descriptions of each participant. The purpose of this study was to seek accurate understanding of meaning and identifying possibilities rather than generalization of findings. In phenomenology, the facts of a situation take on much less importance than the *meanings* of situations (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996).

Other qualitative research methodologies were considered for purposes of this study. However, none appeared to offer the opportunities and possibilities to gain information about this specific research question as the phenomenological method did. Grounded theory researchers use multiple stages of data collection to compare data with existing theory or to generate new theory (Creswell, 1994). However, in view of the fact that little information exists on the topic of sudden, unexpected divorce, grounded theory methodology does not lend itself to research questions about the focus of this research. A goal of examining the meaning of experiences of participants in this study was to better understand specific phenomena, that is, the meanings of sudden, unexpected divorce for those who have experienced the event. Ethnography, although similar in methodology to phenomenology, is chosen when one wants to study behaviors from an intact, cultural group. Researchers study cultural groups within the context of that group's cultural perspective, wherever that may be (Creswell, 1994).

Specifically for this research design, which was intended to explore intricate details about the experience of sudden, unexpected divorce in families, a deep versus wide-lens approach allowed for a multiplicity of reactions to be explored.

### *Conclusion*

Viewed from a family-systems perspective, contemporary researchers recognized that divorce is a multidimensional process of family change (Ahrons, 1999; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; 1997). From this perspective, researchers acknowledged that each family member is affected by the divorce process as well as by each other's reactions to a divorce (Ahrons, 1999; Emery, 2000; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Rice & Rice, 1986; Walsh, 1998).

Researchers (Ahrons, 1999; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999) have reported that family transitions are turning points, uncomfortable periods that signal the ending of familiar experiences at the same time signifying the beginning of new and unfamiliar possibilities. Paradoxically, Ahrons (1999) noted that family transitions are times when personal growth is most likely to occur. This contemporary view appears to echo the earlier research of Erikson (1968) who defined crisis as a necessary turning point, a crucial moment when development must and will go one way or the other. Divorce may be conceptualized as a family developmental crisis. A question arises as to whether the divorcing family's qualitative experiences of the transition support (or inhibit) individual and family growth to either move forward or to stay stuck. By illuminating subjective areas of concern for adults and their children (as reported by the parents) who are going through sudden, unexpected divorces, it was hoped that both the specific risks, as well as the protective factors the custodial parent experiences through sudden, unexpected divorce, would become clearer.

Clapp (2000) reported on the sense of loss and turbulent emotions that can accompany divorce. She observed that some divorcing men and women were astounded by the extent of their losses once the marriage, which had been an important part of their lives, was gone. These losses might include “a lifestyle, future plans, and a chunk of one’s identity” (p. 5). Clapp further assessed that divorce requires more readjustment and reorganization than any other stressful life event in our society except for the death of a spouse. Significantly, Becvar (2006) noted that for those who face unexpected divorce “out of the blue, a level of complexity is added to divorce similar to that of sudden death” ( p. 198).

Carter and McGoldrick (1999) highlighted that the key that determines whether the crisis of divorce is transitional or has permanent, crippling effects is whether or not the divorce is handled in an emotionally adequate way within the family system. Ahrons (1999) indicated that abrupt departures usually create severe crises for those left behind. She stated that abandonment is the ultimate rejection and leaves one feeling helpless. She further indicated that abrupt departures frequently culminate in severe, debilitating family crises. Emery and Coiro (1997) and Walsh (1998) delineated the concept of *resilience* as distinctly separate from the concept of *invulnerability*. From a *resilience* perspective we recognize that some adults and children are vulnerable and not resilient in the face of multiple stressors in divorce. Therefore, they are unable to make the necessary adaptations. However, likewise from a resilience perspective, we recognize that many adults and children bounce back in coping through the divorce. As stated previously, Carter and McGoldrick (1999) and Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that children’s adjustments are highly correlated with a custodial parent’s adjustments.

Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing themes and categories of analysis to emerge from descriptions of complex experiences like sudden, unexpected divorce.

Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research; the focus of which is the essential experiences of the persons going through them. “In family research, phenomenology focuses [*sic*] on the conscious experience of how a family relates to the world” (Beitin & Allen, 2005, p. 253). In interviewing parents who responded to their inter and intrapersonal experiences from a systemic perspective, phenomenology as a method appeared to offer the best vantage point for capturing the meanings and essential experiences of those going through sudden, unexpected divorces.

## Chapter II

### *Review of the Literature*

The dissolution of a marriage, at one time considered a somewhat shameful deviation from normal family life, has now become part of the U. S. way of life (Thompson & Amato, 1999). Describing divorce as a major variation in the U. S. family-life cycle, Carter and McGoldrick (1999) conceptualized divorce and its aftermath as “an interruption or dislocation of the traditional family life cycle, which produces the kind of profound disequilibrium that is associated throughout the entire family life cycle with shifts, gains, and losses in family membership” (p. 373).

Contemporary divorce researchers generally agree that the early phases of separation and divorce (i.e., the first one to two years) represent the most stressful time in the divorce process for families (Kaslow & Schwartz., 1987; 1997; Pam & Pearson, 1998). Short-term distress is predictable, even when it is severe (Ahrons, 1999; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Clapp, 2000; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987; 1997). This research is focused on a specific sub-set of divorce -- sudden, unexpected divorce. Sudden, unexpected divorce is described as divorce in which one suddenly packs her or his bags, moves out, retains a lawyer to handle all legal responsibilities, and sets into motion a process over which the other spouse has no control (Pam & Pearson, 1998; Oakland, 1984).

From a family-systems perspective, Ahrons (1999) reported that divorce is best regarded as a multi-dimensional process of family change. This means it is predictable that each family member will be profoundly affected by the divorce as members of each of newly established post-divorce families are forced to learn new roles, rules, and boundaries. Ahrons noted that divorce is ranked at the top of the list of stressful life events; ambiguity is a big contributor to the

stress. Divorce is marked by severe losses, related not only to the present life-style but also to future plans and dreams. Unresolved grieving for losses involved in divorce is a major deterrent to making a healthy adaptation to divorce. Ahrons reported that abrupt departures usually create severe crises for those left behind.

Little research is available pertaining to sudden, unexpected divorce versus divorce in general. However, contemporary researchers who have addressed a unilateral decision by one party to end the marriage label the ending “abandonment” (Ahrons, 1999; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Dreman, 1991; Hoge, 2000; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Sprenkle & Cyrus, 1983).

Although many studies pertain to divorce in general, including the long- and short-term consequences for divorcing couples and for families, the focus of this literature reviewed was to highlight what we have learned about the impact of divorce alongside what research indicates about reactions to sudden, unexpected events, specifically to the event of abandonment.

A goal for this phenomenological study was to highlight issues that may have become more salient for families as a result of the suddenness of the event, which included lack of preparation for one spouse and for the children in the family unit. Research indicates that about 60% of all contemporary divorces involve children and that young children are more likely to experience divorce than are older children because most divorces occur in early marriage (Emery & Coiro, 1997). Research has also identified that the quality of parent-child relationships, specifically children’s relationships with their residential parents, is significant in a family’s post-divorce adjustment (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Emery & Coiro, 1997; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997). Therefore, understanding the process and the plight of the parent who is abandoned in sudden, unexpected divorce seemed a worthwhile goal of this research.

*Divorce as a process:*



*Letting go while holding on.* Ahrons (1994) described the emotional process of divorce as “letting go while holding on” (p.75) and described the process in the following way:

No matter how you cut it, divorce is painful. Whether you’re old or young, woman or man, rich or poor, the one who leaves or the one who’s been left, uncoupling is disorganizing, unsettling, and extremely stressful. . . . Major decisions involve ambiguity. . . . We cling to the comforts of the old while we agonize over the new and unknown. . . .

For most people, ending a marriage is the most traumatic decision of their life. [*sic*] The usual ways of coping aren’t likely to work. (p. 75)

Marital dissolution as a process has also been described by other authors as a painful and agonizing experience that is marked by bitterness, hurt, rage, depression, and periods of disequilibrium and emotional numbness (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Kaslow, 1995). Even for reasonably healthy adults, the restabilization process, that is, the healing needed for the psychic divorce work to be complete and a sense of wholeness and competency to resurface, usually takes from two to five years (Kaslow, 1997). For children of all ages, the sequelae of their parents’ divorces can have long-term adverse consequences unless a divorce is handled constructively and equitably by the divorcing couple and without engulfing the children in a battle for their parents’ loyalties (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

A critical point for these authors is that no matter what crisis a family faces, a key determinant, whether the crisis is transitional or permanently debilitating, is whether it is handled in an emotionally healthy way within a family system. Emery (2004) and Harvey and Fine (2004) likewise identified a contextual understanding of the way that a family divorces as pivotal to understanding that family’s divorce outcome.

Noting that transitions are turning points, Ahrons (1994) described these transitions as Uncomfortable periods that mark the beginning of something new while signifying the ending of something familiar. Although we may anticipate changes with puzzlement and foreboding, we may also approach them with exhilaration. Transitions are times when we're more personally vulnerable, and paradoxically they're also the times when we're most likely to personally grow. (p. 75)

Ahrons (1994) identified five processes "that together form this giant transition we call divorce" (p. 76). These transitions are: (1) the decision to divorce; (2) the announcement of the divorce; (3) the physical separation itself; (4) the formal divorce; and (5) the aftermath. Ahrons noted that the most grueling disruptions occur during the first three transitions. "Deciding to divorce, telling your spouse and your family, and leaving your mate form the core of the emotional divorce" (p. 77).

*The decision to divorce.* Ahrons (1994) noted that the decision to end a marriage is vastly more difficult than the decision to marry. The first step toward divorce is rarely mutual. It begins with a small, nagging feeling of dissatisfaction that grows in spurts, which then simultaneously retreats. When one really begins to question feelings for his or her mate, emotional leave-taking begins. Behaviors that once were acceptable now become annoying. Slowly, the partner who wants out of the marriage collects increasing evidence to build a case to justify the decision to leave.

*The announcement of divorce.* Announcing one's desire to separate is no small task. For some couples, the announcement is as far as their divorce will go because the announcement itself becomes a catalyst for dialogue and issue resolution. For other couples, the announcement is the first step in a series of escalations and confrontations, maybe even reconciliations. For still

others, the announcement can be a straight, clear, and direct path to separation and divorce (Ahrons, 1994).

*The physical separation.* Ahrons (1994) has described the day the couple separates as a marker event that is more significant for adults than the day of divorce for most divorced people. She also noted that "For children, this is the first time they realize the enormity of what's going on, even though they may have suspected or feared the prospect for some time" (p. 109). There are no clear rules for separating. Many questions need to be decided. Who moves out? When and what do we tell family and friends? Who will attend school functions for the children? Who will attend the wedding of a mutual friend? These questions run deep. Confused and confusing feelings of longing for the other spouse may persist no matter how badly they argued. Adding to the stress of the separation phase is the fact that it is no longer possible to keep the marital problems concealed. During the decision and announcement phases most couples continue to live the rules and the roles they lived during their marriage. However, during the separation phase these rituals cease.

*Dealing with abandonment.* Ahrons (1994) noted that separation involves major changes and requires thoughtful planning, especially when there are children. Children have the right to be told what is going to happen and to have time to process and prepare for it. When the separation occurs on the heels of the announcement, it sets the stage for severe crisis. Abrupt separations usually create severe crises for those left behind. It is the ultimate rejection -- abandonment. Coping mechanisms developed through lesser crises are generally insufficient to deal with abandonment. "The abandonment leaves one feeling totally helpless and frequently culminates in a severe debilitating family crisis, such as a suicide attempt by one partner, or a major clinical depression requiring hospitalization" (p. 111). In addition to predictable stressors

identified by Carter and McGoldrick (1999) in the readjustment to divorce in general, reactions to any sudden, unanticipated aspects of abandonment may likely factor in to the overall divorce adjustment as well.

*Sudden divorce: a systems perspective.* Although parents, mothers or fathers, who had been left in the marriage are the single adults who were interviewed in this research, it is important to understand their experiences as contextualized within the family units they represent. From a family-systems perspective, the presence of children is predictably one factor that affects and impacts the parent's breadth and depth of reaction to a sudden, unexpected divorce. Stress levels associated with the unexpected termination of one's primary relationship, task overload, and socioeconomic and other lifestyle changes may become a forerunner for overall major constructs that are changed, perhaps under duress, within a short period of time. Similarly, a parent's reactions to these major stressors and lifestyle changes would predictably impact children's reactions to the divorce as well. One might expect vastly different research findings for individuals experiencing sudden, unexpected divorce who have no children (Sprenkle & Cyrus, 1983). From a family-systems perspective, however, it is understood that systems function as wholes, and that change in any one part will lead to change in an entire system (Satir, 1972). For families, this means that a family cannot be seen as a collection of individuals, but as a coherent whole (Nichols, 1984). This means that the actions, reactions, and behaviors of children in a family impacted by sudden, unexpected divorce will predictably be part of the parent's reactions, and, conversely, that the parent's actions and reactions will become part of the children's reaction as well. Thus, although individual parents were the interviewees in this research study, it is important to link and contextualize that parent to those children whose

experiences were vicariously incorporated within them, shaping and impacting their actions and reactions throughout the divorce.

The goal of research reviewed in this chapter was to explore aspects of a divorce process which may, because of its sudden, unexpected qualities, lead to more stressful outcomes for parents and children. That is not to say that risk factors in sudden, unexpected divorce may not be ameliorated by resilience factors in the long run. This research is designed to explore meanings custodial parents make of their experiences that may both highlight risks inherent in the process that complicate the attainment of resilience and focus on meanings that support and facilitate its attainment.

As stated previously, Kaslow (1994, 1995) reported that in reasonably healthy adults, the restabilization process needed for the psychic divorce work to be completed usually takes from two to five years. For children of all ages, the adjustments their parent's make play significant roles in determining their own divorce adjustments. Emery (2000, 2004) and Harvey and Fine (2004) have also focused on a contextual understanding of a family's way of divorcing as critical to children's process through the divorce.

For virtually all children, divorce is a deeply painful, difficult transition but it does not remain so forever. . . . Children can emerge from divorce emotionally healthy and resilient but it takes a conscientious effort--sometimes even a heroic one--on the part of parents . . . . (Emery, 2004, p. 5)

Or, as Harvey and Fine (2004) stated, "Children often have many positive assets that can be marshaled by caring adults to help them navigate even daunting divorce situations" (p. 21).

Resilience can be conceptualized as an innate aspect of almost any transitional process.

Yet, questions raised in this research are based on complications that may be inherent in abandonment and sudden endings, identified as risk factors in the work of Ahrons (1994) and others (Dreman, 1991; Pam & Pearson, 1998; Sprenkle & Cyrus, 1983). Ahrons (1994) reported that the core of a divorce experience rests on the decision to divorce, the announcement of the divorce, and the ultimate leaving of one's mate as part of the decision to divorce. Therefore, one might question what complications exist for one spouse (and a family) when the other spouse abandons the marriage, thereby unilaterally ending the marriage. What complications may be posed by the leaver announcing her/his decision to leave to an unsuspecting, unprepared spouse? What might the ripple effects of the sudden leaving be on the children? Finally, in the ultimate leaving and moving out, what state might the spouse who is left be in to carry forward in the most stabilized way for her/himself and the children? Ahrons (1994) focused on abrupt departures leading to severe crises for those left behind, with confusion, uncertainty, and rage being predictable reactions. Abandonment leaves one feeling helpless, and abandoned children regress or act out. Ahrons noted that "The rejection is too great and sudden to cope with" (p. 111). Children have a need to be told in advance and a right to process and prepare for that change, but what happens when that does not occur?

#### *A Context for Sudden, Unexpected Divorce*

Although there is a paucity of literature on the topic of sudden, unexpected divorce, a number of authors have highlighted issues to be considered in contextualizing this specific type of divorce experience. Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) first identified discreet stressors that might lead this type of divorce to being considered a crisis, a catastrophic source of stress because of its unpredictability. Noting that in only a small percentage of divorces do both partners equally want the termination, Sprenkle and Cyrus considered that in the majority of divorces there is a partner

who must adjust to a situation he or she does not want.

*Factors affecting the spouse who is left.* Becvar (2006) reported that in situations in which one spouse has already decided that the marriage is over, the non-consenting spouse is faced with special challenges. One challenge is re-creating life as a single person, and perhaps as a single parent. Additional challenges consist of “coming to terms with the added pain of rejection for which there was no warning or preparation” (Becvar, 2006, p. 196). The author noted that helping clients in this situation navigate difficult waters requires understanding of the specific context and the factors that affect successful outcome.

In Sprenkle and Cyrus’ (1983) research on sudden, unexpected divorce, some issues the authors considered included the meaning of emotional abandonment in the family, why this particular stressor is so painful, not only for the individuals involved but also for their families and friends, what factors determine the level of stress experienced by emotionally abandoned spouses, and the methods, both constructive and destructive, used to cope with the stress. Sprenkle and Cyrus also identified the presence of children, attachment to the former spouse, perception of being a failure, social rejection, change in lifestyle and routines, and shifts in one’s social support system as salient issues to be considered when evaluating the effect of sudden, unexpected divorce on the family.

#### *The Meaning of Emotional Abandonment*

Anderson (2000) identified abandonment as one of our most primal fears. She noted that the devastation of abandonment can stem from many different circumstances, including the nature and duration of the relationship, the intensity of feelings about the relationship, the circumstances of the break-up, and one’s previous history of losses. If the abandonment was sudden or unexpected, Anderson noted that shock and disbelief first set in. These must be

addressed before one can begin to grieve the loss. The grieving process is similar to bereavement over a death -- loss is loss. However, abandonment grief is described as having a life of its own, stemming from circumstances that led up to it and from feelings of rejection and inadequacy that accompany it.

It is because abandonment's knife cuts all the way through to the self that it is so painful.

You lose not just your loved one but your core belief in yourself. You doubt that you are lovable and acceptable as a mate. (Anderson, 2000, p. 11)

Anderson reported that sometimes people feel the loss so deeply that their personal sense of self-worth is undermined. Identifying a loss of ego-strength is crucial to understanding the dynamics of abandonment since the tendency toward self-attack and self-recrimination are critical to understanding the grieving process.

*Stages of abandonment.* Anderson (2000) identified five stages of abandonment. These include (1) shattering, (2) withdrawal, (3) internalizing the rejection, (4) rage, and (5) lifting. Shattering is not unique to abandonment but rather serves as the initial stage in all types of grief where significant loss is experienced. However, the *shattering* that occurs in abandonment is unique because the loss was not due to a death but because someone acted on free will and chose to leave. "In fact, if rejection, desertion or betrayal played a part in your loss, it is not just your sense of security that has been shattered, but your belief in yourself, your sense of self worth" (Anderson, 2000, pp. 20-21).

The *withdrawal* stage was likened to withdrawal from an addiction, in that one craves the other person after the initial shock of separation has worn off. During the worst of it the one left may believe that, without the lost loved one, life is over. The more time that elapses and the longer one's needs go unmet, the more the body and mind ache for all that was lost. "A



profound sense of loss intrudes on every waking moment” (Anderson, 2000, p. 71), and the effects of withdrawal are cumulative and wavelike in that they often get worse before they get better.

Stage three, or *internalizing the rejection*, was described by Anderson (2000) as a process in which the emotional experience is internalized, becoming part of oneself and allowed to change one’s deepest beliefs. Anderson reported that internalizing the rejection is how one’s body incorporates the wound of abandonment. By taking the abandonment to heart, by internalizing rejection, one injures oneself. “During the internalizing stage, the self searches desperately for its lost love, then turns its rage and frustration against itself. The wound becomes a self-contained system where self-doubt incubates and fear becomes ingrown” (p. 116). Internalizing constitutes the most crucial stage of the abandonment process when the emotional wound makes one most vulnerable, threatening to damage one’s self-esteem.

*Rage*, the fourth stage in Anderson’s (2000) description of abandonment is described as a protest against pain. Rage is characterized as a process through which one fights back, thereby refusing to be victimized by the loss of the one who abandoned. This fourth stage is the most volatile. In contrast with the earlier stage of internalization, rage is now directed outward rather than inward. A more effective, self-empowering type of anger emerges that is a good sign because it signifies active resistance to the injury.

*Lifting*, the fifth stage, is portrayed by Anderson (2000) as a time of hope. It represents spontaneous remission that begins slowly and then gathers momentum. In this stage stress and tension are decreased, and, having faced the emotional lessons of abandonment, the survivor is enabled to rediscover lost hopes and dreams.

*The Presence of Children*

Research indicated that about one-half of parents who divorce have children who fall into the two-and-one-half-to-six-year age range (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998). Hetherington, Bridges & Insabella (1998) noted that young children are likely to assess the divorce situation somewhat unrealistically, blaming themselves for the divorce, feeling anxiety about abandonment, and generally being less capable of utilizing the protective resources others have to offer them. Also, approximately 55% of separated or divorced women in the United States with children under six years old live below the poverty line (Teachman & Paasch, 1994).

Almost all parents worry about the impact of divorce on their children and find issues related to custody arrangements, visitation, and economic support to be particularly stressful (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Kaslow and Schwartz (1997) pointed out that children tend to love both of their parents and expect to be loved in return by them. A variety of scenarios may ensue in the divorce situation, including distance that may grow between parent and child. A concern is that the child often blames her/himself for this distance. Or, one parent may denigrate the other in the presence of the child, which then can lead to loyalty conflicts (Boszormeny-Nagy & Krasner, 1986). Another scenario may include parents who choose to be absent from the child's life because they experience the repeated separations at the end of visits as too painful. Custody arrangements also impact where the parents will live and in what socioeconomic circumstances.

#### *Impact of Children's Adjustment on Parents and vice versa*

In addition to the age of the children at the time of the divorce, Sprenkle & Cyrus (1983) noted that parental stress is also linked with children's adjustments. A number of variables that may determine children's adjustments include the quality of the nurturing relationship between the children and the custodial parent, the quality of the relationship between the ex-spouses, the

psychological adjustment of the parents, especially the custodial parent, the reliability of the relationship with the non-custodial parent, and the custodial parent's financial capability.

Sprenkle and Cyrus noted that most of these variables interact with each other and that children's adaptations to the divorce are largely dependent upon others (predominantly the parents) who make up the relationship context for the children. Ahrons (1994) also reported that stress levels would predictably be higher when no age-appropriate explanation about the divorce is made to the children or when children make up their own explanations such as believing that they caused Daddy or Mommy to leave, that they will not see Mommy or Daddy again, or fears that if they love one parent, the other parent will be angry. Ahrons concluded that a strong, positive correlation exists between levels of stress of the parents and the children.

Carter and McGoldrick (1999) pointed out that, when people know what to expect during times of transition, it does not take away the upheaval, but it helps them to cope better with the changes inherent in the disruption. In divorce, all of the normal coping abilities are burdened by complex personal and familial changes. It is no small feat for divorcing parents or their children to experience the difficult task of the parents' terminating their marital relationship while simultaneously redefining their parental relationship.

Research studies indicated that divorced custodial parents, compared to married parents, invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996; Thompson et al., 1992). Many of these deficits in parenting are attributed to the stress of the marital disruption and single parenting (Amato, 2000).

Wallerstein, in an early longitudinal study (1980, 2000), described the family environment for children in which one parent, usually the father, left the mother, who may have

earlier worked part-time or not at all, and was now forced back to work or perhaps went back to school.

There was no transition, no cushioning of the blow . . . . Their loneliness, their sense that no one was there for them, was overwhelming. They were being left in the care of strangers, often in hastily arranged caretaking settings, or even worse, with older siblings who, being children themselves, did not hesitate to withhold food, to threaten, or to hit the younger children in order to enforce household routines. What has remained was their sense of an abrupt, sudden diminution of nurturance and protection--the disappearance of one parent and the absence of the other over many hours of the day and evening. (p. 370)

#### *Persistence of Attachment*

Noting that there is an emotional bonding process that forms between spouses that seems to die more slowly than love itself, Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) suggested that this process parallels the attachment experiences described between children and parents. Anderson (2000) and Weiss (1975) have written extensively about the erosion of love but the persistence of attachment in divorce. The context for the persistence of this marital bond is formed through the intertwining of many separate strands, including sexual intimacy, shared parenting, companionship, mutual obligation, collaboration in furnishing and maintaining a home, and love.

#### *The Loss of Identity*

Harvey (1998) observed that long after the loss, an attachment figure may continue to be thought of with affection and closeness; indeed, the attachment figure may continue to be loved. Harvey noted that the result of successful grief work is not to banish the role that the lost figure had in one's emotional life, but rather to help the one left find acceptance of the absence of that

attachment figure in one's present and future.

Weiss (1982) explained that marriage becomes part of the essence of who we are and infiltrates the most remote portions of our lives. He stated that loss of the marriage may be experienced as "the loss of a limb" (p. 71). He reported that this is true even in situations in which the marriage had been unhappy or distant. An understanding of the loss of identity that Weiss described may be contextualized as the

. . . . constant, uninterrupted custom of years together, . . . the years of going places together, consulting each other on management of the children, the house, presenting ourselves to others as a couple, sharing a house, a car, a bedroom, that makes our marriage part of ourselves. (p. 71)

#### *Feelings of Failure and Loss of Status*

Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) stated that, although there is a social acceptance of divorce, there are still negative stereotypes and sanctions that exist for someone who already feels bad to seize upon. They reported that divorce is ambiguous; people do not know whether to congratulate or console the newly divorced. Frequently nothing is said, and the divorced person makes interpretations consistent with his/her diminished sense of self-worth.

People whose marriages failed, who strongly believed that marriage is a lifelong commitment, were reported to have high levels of stress when their marriages terminated (Booth & Amato, 1991; Simon & Marcussen, 1999). Similarly, DeGarmo and Kitson (1996) found that divorce adjustment was easier for women who were not heavily invested in their marital identities. Even for couples who divorce after relatively brief marriages, Ahrons (1999) reported that the discomfort of the loss of the marital role is keenly felt. "Losing the role of being coupled and returning to singleness are fraught with feelings of failure and loss of status" (p. 389).

### *Change in Economic Lifestyle*

Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) reported that divorce may involve a dramatic change in socioeconomic status, moving, changes in parental responsibilities, assumption of different household responsibilities, possibly having to return to work, and/or increasing work hours to maintain an established style of living. Amato (2000) likewise stated that, in the immediate post-divorce period, downward economic mobility (especially for mothers) and other disruptive factors, such as moving from the family home into less expensive housing in a poorer neighborhood, have the potential to create a new set of stressors for the family to contend with.

Simons (1996) contended that changes in economic lifestyle through divorce have the potential to affect the quality of parenting. Simons, citing the earlier work of Arendell (1986) and Cherlin (1982) reported a 30% to 50% reduction in income for women after divorce, following the loss of the absent father's income. He observed that much of the research on family economic structure after divorce has failed to make a distinction between economic pressure and income. Families suffer *economic pressure* to the extent that they cannot provide for material needs, fall behind in paying debts, and have to cut back on everyday expenses to survive financially. Simons emphasized that economic pressure is not a subjective issue but rather an understanding of the family's income relative to its financial obligations. Simons reported that financial strain exerts negative influence on parental functioning.

Wallerstein (1980; 2000) highlighted the force of economic hardship on families in her research study.

After separation Paula's mother was in dire financial straits. . . . Without marketable skills, she went to work full-time at minimum wage. . . . In the space of a few months, this cheerful, chatty, always available young mother whom Paula and Joan had counted

on, was transformed into a strained, quiet, driven, desperately tired stranger who came home only to scream at her daughters and the babysitter for not cleaning up the mess in the house, or to sit, silent and resentful, eating the TV dinners that had replaced home-cooked meals. Every night she stumbled directly to her bedroom after ordering her daughters to bed without the stories and cuddling they had always shared together. . . . Many take night jobs, shift jobs . . . that keep them away from home all weekend. They are physically exhausted and emotionally depleted as they run in place. . . . Their valiant efforts to feed, clothe, and house their children tragically diminishes their availability as parents. (pp. 164-165)

#### *Shifts in Social-Support Systems*

Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) identified that suddenly divorcing persons may experience loss of support from their friendship networks and, as a result, may feel socially isolated through this transition. Friends and relatives may be caught off guard by the divorce. Often relatives will show concern for both parties in the short turn, but eventually divorcing persons increase contact with their own families while decreasing contact with their ex-spouses' families. This can lead to anguish for grandparents, in particular parents of the non-custodial parent, who worry about access to their grandchildren. Amato (2000) also recognized loss of emotional support due to declining contact with in-laws, married friends, and neighbors as an additional stressor that needs to be incorporated into the post-divorce adjustment.

#### *Sense of Helplessness*

Marital abandonment was noted by Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) to precipitate the feeling of helplessness and the absence of a sense of control over one's fate. Once one is presented by the other with the unilateral decision to terminate the marriage, there is nothing that can be done.

Vaughn (1990) likewise observed a lack of power and control that may be built in to the separation and divorce process for at least one individual. The author reported that whichever person expresses the wish to separate takes control of the timing of that separation. The other is left with the loss of an important resource, that is, the ability to control the outcome. Vaughn stated that the combination of the sudden loss of power plus the social embarrassment of being rejected can result in a devastating experience.

### *Shattered Assumptions*

The role that “*shattered assumptions*” (Janoff-Bulman, 1992) plays in a family’s life after sudden, unexpected divorce is another area to be considered. Fundamental assumptions form the basis of our conceptual systems; they are the assumptions that we are least aware of and least likely to challenge. They form the nucleus of our internal worlds. Janoff-Bulman noted that we typically move through life without considering our fundamental assumptions. Our schemas serve us well. They provide us with the means for making sense of our worlds and for tackling new experiences with relative confidence. However, there are times when our guiding paradigms, our fundamental assumptions, are seriously challenged. These times induce psychological crises. These are times of trauma when the new data of experiences do not resemble our fundamental assumptions. This leads to shattered assumptions. It is imperative to recognize that the response to any particular life event must be understood in terms of the person involved. There is always an appraisal process by the individual. It is how an event is understood that ultimately determines whether it will be traumatic or not, for “it always comes down to a question of interpretation and meaning” (p. 52).

### *Sudden, Unexpected Loss*



Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) reported that an experience of marital abandonment is unique. Therefore, the abandonee has no prior experience to help cope with the event. Ahrons (1994) likewise pointed out that prior life experiences do not facilitate the experience of abandonment in divorce. Persons who initiate divorce (the abandoner) have opportunities to develop coping mechanisms or to develop support systems in advance while the abandonee usually does not have that opportunity. It is noted that men are more likely to have underdeveloped social networks while women are more likely to have underdeveloped professional networks (Kitson & Raschke, 1981).

#### *Multiple Losses*

Weiss (1998) identified three categories of loss, namely, (1) losses that produce grief, which include losses of critically important relationships, (2) losses that damage self-esteem, foster self-doubt, and produce a sense of diminished social worth, which include losses of social position and role in a community, and (3) losses that occur as a result of victimization, which include loss of self-respect through social humiliation. Given a review of the empirical literature on divorce, as well as a review of the effects of sudden, unexpected events, it seems reasonable to consider the possibility that all three categories of loss may permeate aspects of the lives of those experiencing this specific type of divorce.

#### *Grief Reactions Complicated by the Presence of Trauma*

Hoge (2002) focused on the complications inherent in the co-occurrence of grief reactions and the presence of trauma within the context of sudden divorce. Hoge reported on her research findings on sudden, unexpected divorce specifically as it pertains to women who were left by their husbands prior to or within one year of the birth of a first child. Noting that "childbirth and divorce are words that do not seem to belong together" (p. xi), Hoge observed

that a subset of divorce exists in which at least one party is unable to grieve the end of the marriage. The author referred to this as “*traumatic*” divorce as distinguished from more ordinary divorce. Hoge highlighted in her study that the way people behave under extreme stress does not reflect the way they would ordinarily behave. The author noted that there is a discontinuity in behavior under extreme stress that has been observed in the research on stress, but which has not been fully recognized for the situation of divorce. That is to say, assumptions about divorce are applied in a general way to all divorces, traumatic or not. Therefore, there is a need for additional research on traumatic divorce.

#### *Processing Trauma, Processing Grief*

In distinguishing between grief versus trauma responses, Hoge (2002) acknowledged that divorce leaves its mark on almost all who go through it, but emphasized that under good enough conditions, people are able to grieve the loss of their partners and go on. Hoge highlighted the importance that the role of grieving plays in losing a partner, and identified the ability to grieve as key to letting go of the marriage while likewise holding on to some positive internal representations of a former spouse. However, under more extreme conditions of sudden loss and termination of the relationship in a traumatic way, which is what occurs when one partner unilaterally ends the relationship and physically leaves the marriage, the one who is left may not react with grief but rather will suffer trauma. Hoge made the point that, unlike someone who is able to grieve, a traumatized person becomes numb to any warm or fond feelings for the former spouse. Previously cherished memories become partitioned, with little or no access to them emotionally because they are too conflicted and painful to bear. Because good memories are effectively walled off, a traumatized spouse is unable to reflect on them, to decathect gradually,

to grieve. As a result “Large areas of the inner world, including thoughts, feelings, and internal representations, are blocked” (p. xiv).

Significantly, Hoge (2002) realized, through her research with women who were abandoned shortly before or right after childbirth, that divorce was precipitated not so much by difficulties in the relationship as by a husband entering an internal state of profound, personal crisis. Hoge emphasized her concern that there is an implicit assumption in the clinical world based on the presumption that partners who live intimately in each other’s space must certainly sense each other’s moods. Coming from that perspective, one would perceive that neither member of the couple should be too surprised by the divorce because both of them “should have seen it coming” (p. 2). When these couples enter therapy, Hoge observed, they are generally each encouraged to take mutual responsibility for the marriage’s flaws. “The unstated value judgment is that if one partner was truly surprised, this reflects, at best, a large investment in denial and, at worst, a lack of psychological sophistication” ( p. 2). Hoge noted that, although this may be true in some divorces, it does not take into account (in this case) “how pregnancy and childbirth can trigger deeply buried issues and fears, causing one partner to enter an unexpected personal crisis that explodes the marriage” (p. 3). Based on Hoge’s research and observations, questions are raised about other unexpected personal crises that may create a precipitating event for one spouse in the couple relationship that exploded the marriage into a crisis of sudden, unexpected divorce.

### *Coping With the Sudden Divorce*

Hoge’s (2002) recognition that, in the absence of being able to grieve, a traumatized spouse becomes numb, is significant. Anderson (2000) likewise observed that, in the shattering first stage of abandonment, pain and panic must be resolved before one is able to do the

necessary work of grieving. Other authors (Raphael, Middleton, Martinek, & Misso, 1993) also observed that in cases where trauma and grief reactions co-occur, that is, when there has been a traumatic event and a simultaneous loss, researchers contend that it is first necessary to deal with the traumatic event, which may block grief, before grieving can be accomplished.

### *Coping Strategies of Adults*

Dreman (1991) also focused on the sudden ending of a marriage. Using a process model of short- and long-term coping strategies for dealing with traumatic events, Dreman cited the work of Figley (1983, 1985) who proposed that the victim of trauma must transcend the passive role of “*victim*” to assume a role of mobile “*survivor*”. This recovery implied a transition from helplessness to active integration during which the person cognitively and emotionally accommodated and integrated traumatic events as well as changed realities in the present. It is through this integration process that a person assumes adaptive attitudes and behavioral changes occur that contribute to long-term, adaptive adjustment.

Dreman (1991) observed that victims of traumatic events may initially cope by engaging in denial or prior behaviors in attempting to stabilize themselves in the face of changes. Defensive behaviors, such as denial of the painful event, may help the individual and family cope more effectively with the crisis in the short-run by controlling the severe stress and overall anxiety of the crisis. However, research indicated that continuation of such denial and a failure to implement adaptive change may prove maladaptive to long-term adjustment.

### *Coping Strategies of Children*

Dreman (1991) reported clinical research findings implying that divorce may be a traumatic event which has severe impact on both adults and children. Eth and Pynoos (1985) compared the reactions of children of divorce to the traumatic reactions of children who had

witnessed the homicide of a parent. They reported similarities between the traumatized children whose parent was killed and the most severely affected children of divorce. Immediately following divorce, children exhibited denial (Leupnitz, 1979; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988), shame (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974; 1976; 1980), anxiety (Wallerstein et al., 1988; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998) and recurrent intrusive recollection of the traumatic events (Wallerstein, 1983; Wallerstein et al., 1988). The central most poignant moment in the divorce reported by children was the actual separation when one parent actually left the home (Dreman, 1991). Ahrons (1994) and Wallerstein (1983) each described the physical leaving of one parent as a core feature of emotional divorce. It is unclear what individual children may tell themselves about these defining moments, or what their perceptions are of the meanings of one parent leaving, especially for young children who have not yet mastered object constancy. However, as a core event in the emotional process of divorce for children who are left in the care of a custodial parent, who, likewise, may be having a difficult, defining moment as the other spouse leaves, it was hoped that through this research the meaning of the divorce event may be more clearly understood for that remaining parent.

Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little (2003) pointed out that, in spite of a generation of divorce research providing evidence of the developmental risks faced by children of divorce, we still know relatively little about families with very young children. These families represent one of the most vulnerable subgroups of divorcing families. Challenges inherent in infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool development are intensified by parental separation and divorce since children's needs for security, trust, autonomy, and patience that characterize this early stage of life collide head on with the complexity and stresses that often accompany divorce. Young

children are likely to evaluate the reasons for the divorce less realistically, to blame themselves more readily, and to feel anxiety about abandonment.

*Sudden Divorce: The Initial Phases*

Dreman (1991) also cited the research of Herz Brown (1988) regarding the aftermath phase in the first year following separation or divorce as being as devastating as any natural disaster. A family may feel as if a hurricane has struck, and few are able to put words to their experience. This initial phase may also be characterized by relatively low parental activity and efficacy. Figley (1983; 1985) noted that human-made traumatic events like divorce may be even more emotionally devastating than natural disasters or “*acts of God*” such as earthquakes or hurricanes since there is more culpability and guilt involved in the former.

Dreman also observed that in divorce, as in other traumatic events, people may initially be defensive. This observation parallels Hoge (2002) who reported that, upon learning of the impending loss of their mates through divorce, mothers of newborns became numb, emotionally blocked, and unable to grieve their emotional losses. Subsequently, Dreman (1991) noted that people become more capable of active cognitive-emotional integration when the initial shock, stress, and anxiety subside. As stated previously, under the best of circumstances, the initial aftermath phase for divorce in general encompasses an intense situational crisis that persists for one to two years after the initial separation/divorce (Kaslow & Schwartz, 2001). This situational-crisis phase is characterized by shock, bewilderment, and low parental efficacy. It is that initial situational-crisis stage of divorce, compounded by the additional overlay of the divorce being sudden and unexpected, that was explored in this qualitative, phenomenological research study.

Becvar (2006) reported that, for those who face unexpected divorce “out of the blue,” (p. 198) another level of complexity may be added that is similar to the experience of sudden death.

As with a sudden death, the coping system of the rejected . . . is severely challenged. In addition to the various feelings associated with the loss of the relationship, they must deal with shock, disbelief, and extreme disruption in all areas of their lives. In a moment, their world has shattered, often bringing about a sense of unreality as they find themselves projected into a totally new realm with no direction on how to proceed, indeed, often with no idea even of how or where to begin to move. (p. 198)

#### *A Subjective Understanding of Traumatic Stress*

From a systemic perspective, Figley (1989) described a subjective understanding of traumatic stress. Figley observed that the connections family members have to one another helped explain why they are vulnerable to stress, particularly to traumatic stress. In a systemic way, when one member in the family is upset, efforts are made by everyone to reduce the stress and thereby to correct the problem. Figley described traumatized families as those “who are attempting to cope with an extraordinary stressor that has disrupted their normal life routine in unwanted ways” (p. 5). A traumatized family is struggling to recover from, or cope with, an injury or wound to their system. The injury could range from a seemingly small incident to an extraordinary event that affects the family in significant ways that results in unwanted disruptions in their life routine.

Boss (2006) reported that ambiguous loss is inherently traumatic because the inability to resolve the situation causes shock, confusion, disequilibrium, and often, immobilization. Without closure, the author observed that traumatic reactions to this type of loss could become chronic.

To understand the trauma of ambiguous loss, it is helpful to recognize the distress of more ordinary loss . . . . Loss is difficult to talk about because it reminds family members as well as trained professionals that something could not be fixed or cured. Most people cannot tolerate for long the feeling of being in a situation that is outside of their control. To many in cultures that value mastery, the goal is to win, not lose. Because of this strong value, there is in our culture a tendency to deny loss. Grieving is acceptable, but we should get over it and get back to work. Whereas finding closure with ordinary losses is difficult, it is impossible with ambiguous loss because there is no official recognition of there even being a real loss. (p. 4)

“When there is ambiguous loss, *individual resiliency depends on a person’s ability to live comfortably with the ambiguity*”(p. 48).

Thompson and Amato (1999), cited earlier, observed that mothers, fathers, and children are each changed by divorce, but the greatest concern is focused on the children, who are least responsible for the upheaval they go through and who are most vulnerable to the emotional pain that comes with the ending of a marriage. In the context of that family system, the child learns whether the world is one of chaos or order, change or stability, violence or tenderness, deprivation or nurturance (Everstine & Everstine, 1993; Figley, 1983; Thompson & Amato, 1999).

### *Subjective Markers/Making Meaning*

Harvey (2002) also focused on the importance of understanding subjective markers in a major loss. Harvey pointed out that others outside of the subjective experiences may not always see or understand the subjective perceptions of loss for those experiencing it. Harvey observed that the disquiet of loss and trauma frequently become the source not only of anxiety and



depression, but also hold within them the other side -- of hope and generosity. Harvey believed it unlikely that everyone who experiences loss will automatically grow, but rather argued that the transforming key turning loss into growth is doing the “hard work of the mind and spirit that gives our losses meaning” (p. 9). He observed that we transcend our losses and develop resilience only when we actively learn and gain insight from our losses, or when we find meaning through them. Anderson (2000) acknowledged a similar process when describing the fifth stage of abandonment, that is, *lifting*. It is in this final stage that people let go of the shame connected to the abandonment, gain insight into strengths that helped them transform from victim to survivor, and have the realization that they have triumphed through a powerful life experience.

Everstine and Everstine (1993) reported that psychological trauma occurs in the wake of an unexpected event that a person has experienced intimately and forcefully. From this perspective Everstine and Everstine viewed trauma as a response, a reaction, to a person’s experience of an overwhelming event. Kazak (1992) identified that the changes and stressors that affect families vary widely and that all change, positive or negative, involves loss. Some changes are voluntary while others are not. While positive or negative, voluntary or involuntary change may be stressful; the underlying constructs of choice and control carry the potential to mediate distress.

Everstine and Everstine (1993) observed that, when trauma comes into the life of a child, developing connections between “internal process and external systems is disrupted. The result can be change of catastrophic proportions . . . the very least of which will probably divert energy away from healthy development” p. 113). Many children who have been traumatized lack linguistic skills to verbalize their experiences to a clinician. A traumatic event can deprive the

child of resources for support that may be vitally needed for recovery. Immediate family members may be unavailable, at least temporarily. One can perceive that in the early throes of divorce, particularly divorce over which one party had no choice or control, parents may be overloaded physically and emotionally, and, therefore, are less available to the children. Depending upon frequency and quality of contact with the non-custodial parent, children's needs may be more or less met.

Terr (1991) proposed that childhood traumas are broken down into two rough categories, type I (sudden blow) and type II (long-standing, repeated ordeals). One complication of sudden, unexpected divorce for children may involve the effects of both type-I and type-II traumas. The sudden blow of losing one parent from the family home, in combination with whatever changes are wrought in the other parent as a result of the marital abandonment, could result in prolonged chaos and destabilization for the family.

A goal of this research was to understand the effects that this type of sudden marital disruption has on remaining spouses, to help mitigate the worst of those effects, to resolve the early stages of shock and denial, thereby facilitating movement toward the grieving process, and to help the parent move toward resolution and reorganization.

#### *Family Crisis and Ambiguous Loss*

Boss (2002) observed that high levels of family stress can lead to family crisis. *Family crisis* is defined as:

- (a) A disturbance in the equilibrium that is so overwhelming, (b) a pressure that is so severe, or (c) a change that is so acute that the family system is blocked, immobilized or incapacitated. At least for a time, the family does not function. Family boundaries are no longer maintained, customary roles and tasks are no longer performed, and family

members can no longer function at optimal levels, physically or psychologically. (pp. 62-63)

Boss highlighted the importance of understanding the context surrounding a family's ability to manage stress and the need to understand the perception and meaning a family places on an event. She further noted that when ambiguity surrounds the question of whether a family member is present or absent, "ambiguous loss" (p. 95) may occur. Ambiguous loss, or "boundary ambiguity" (p. 95) is defined as:

Not knowing who is in and who is out of one's family. It is the outcome of a situation of incongruence between physical and psychological presence in the family. Physical presence is determined by actual bodily presence in the home; psychological presence is the presence of a physically absent family member in one's mind, cognitively and emotionally . . . . The family boundary is no longer maintainable, roles are confused, tasks remain undone, and the structure is immobilized. From a psychological perspective, cognition is blocked by the ambiguity, decisions are delayed, and coping and grieving processes are frozen. (p. 95)

Filled with ambiguity, losses that cannot be clarified or verified become traumatic (Boss, 2006). Treatment that is neither systemic nor contextual, that is individually focused, but without understanding the relevance of the loss, is missing a contextual understanding of the trauma. A spouse whose marriage ended in abandonment through unexpected divorce, who likewise is responsible for childcare routines and activities, may predictably be sifting and sorting through feelings of ambiguity, unresolved grief, and a sense of immobilization. Supported with the strength of family-systems skills, family therapists and family psychologists can exercise a potential to offer hope and an opportunity to join with parents and children as they

work through the confusion that stems from ambiguous loss. Ambiguity would be understandable for parents with lingering feelings of connection and attachment to mates who have abandoned them as well as for children, who know they have another parent, but who may not see that parent nearly as frequently as before. The more a clinical community is able to understand and to help the client family understand and make meaning of the chaos and confusion surrounding their experiences, the more that parent and family is likely to be helped to move through denial and disorganization to a higher level of understanding and integration.

### *Family Systems and Resilience*

A family-resilience approach helps us to understand how families survive and regenerate even in the face of overwhelming stress (Walsh, 1998). Rather than looking toward any single model for a resilient family, Walsh (1998) suggested the importance of helping each family identify key processes that strengthen their abilities to overcome adversity. We cope with crisis and adversity by making meaning of our experiences. How families make sense of a crisis situation and endow it with meaning is a critical step in developing resilience (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988; Patterson & Garwick, 1994).

The clinical relevance of helping couples make sense of the process of sudden divorce becomes clear. Becvar (2006) noted that, even in today's society with its high rate of divorce, most couples expect that their marriages will represent a lifetime commitment. When that is not the case, they may find themselves grieving not only for the loss of their relationship, but also for the loss of goals and expectations that comprised the foundation of their lives. "For example, the client may question whether the marriage ever had meaning for the spouse, or whether 'everything' was a lie. She is likely to express feelings of failure, may also doubt her own judgment and perceptions" (Becvar, 2006, pp. 200-201).

*Divorce in Diverse Cultures and Religions*

Based on a history of generous welfare benefits in Norway, one fairly common view is that divorce risks or negative outcomes for children in Scandinavia are non-existent or smaller than those found in the United States. However, in a large scale study of 15-year-old children in Norway, a somewhat paradoxical pattern of findings was found (Brevik & Olweus, 2006). Negative associations between parental divorce and academic achievement were found to be generally similar in Norway to those found in the United States, despite differences in family policy and generous welfare benefits for single mothers in Norway. The results cast some doubt on the value of the economic- deprivation viewpoint in explaining the effects of divorce since Norwegian welfare benefits do not seem to mitigate the association between divorce and negative outcomes for the children studied.

African Americans' rates of divorce have historically been higher than those of other ethnic groups in the United States (Ruggles, 1997). As estimated by Phillips & Sweeney (2005) the risk of an African American woman's marriage ending in divorce is more than 50% greater than that of either a non-Hispanic White or a U.S.-born Mexican American woman. African American relationships have been characterized by high levels of affection but also by interpersonal tensions that threaten relationship stability. Some authors have hypothesized that noncomplementarity between partners in areas such as attitudes and socioeconomic status may contribute to interpersonal tension and marital breakdown among African Americans (Franklin, 1984; Patterson, 1998; Staples, 1981). However, Anderson (1999) and Porter & Bronzaft (1995) highlighted mistrust as a salient issue in African American intimate relationships. Clarkwest (2007) suggested that African American couples experience greater between-spouse dissimilarity than non African-Americans in a number of areas. Tensions in relationship processes in African

American relationships during the initial phase of the relationship may contribute to greater dissimilarity among African American couples. It is hypothesized that African American newlyweds may possess lower expectations of relationship success than their non-African American counterparts.

A sharp increase in divorce among older Japanese is reported to be shaking long-held beliefs about that country's social stability and harmony (Sakurai, 2000). Between 1973 and 1997 the number of divorces per year among couples married for more than 30 years increased more than eightfold. Japanese are still less likely to get divorced than U. S. couples with nearly half of all marriages in the United States ending in divorce compared to about one-third in Japan. However, the divorce rate is rising faster for older couples than for any other age group in Japan. This may be evidence of the social costs of years of dedication to work that made Japan's postwar economic prosperity possible. Elderly couples are reaching retirement years without knowing each other, which may be attributable to the fact that women stayed home to raise children while men worked long and hard hours.

Additionally, the tradition of the eldest son caring for the parents in old age in the Japanese tradition is also changing. This is leaving elderly couples more alone together than they ever were when they spent the greatest part of the day apart. Sakurai (2000) noted that most divorces among elderly couples are initiated by women, although increasingly men are initiating divorce. Sakurai reported that more elderly Japanese couples are seeking counseling to salvage their marriages, an approach that would have been unheard of a few decades ago.

It is difficult to make universal statements about the relationship of Muslim men and women based upon the fact that Muslim families have immigrated to the United States from so many different countries with distinct cultural backgrounds (Daneshpour, 1998).

Local ethnic, social, and historical factors impact ways in which the Islamic faith is interpreted and applied. These influences determine how strict, or how traditional and open the interpretation of Islam is, in a given place.

From the Islamic point of view, marriage is not only an instrument for legalizing sexual relations, but it is an agreement that unites a couple's existence, bringing them into a new rhythm together. Marriage brings them out of solitariness and turns them into a couple. Instead of being single individuals, marriage in the Muslim faith makes them complementary to each other (Motahary, 1974).

Divorce results in the end to all responsibilities the couple has to each other. From the Islamic point of view, divorce is undesirable in principle. There are conditions for divorce. The husband who divorces must be of mature age and must be of sound mind. The husband must be exercising his own free will. Two witnesses must be present. According to the Qur'an, divorce must be pronounced in the presence of at least two trustworthy witnesses.

Divorce may be either revocable or irrevocable. In revocable divorce, if the man regrets his decision and wants to resume conjugal relations, the marriage is automatically restored, and there is no need to re-marry. There are several conditions for irrevocable divorce. These include the husband agreeing to end the marriage at the request of his wife, the marriage ending because both have asked each other to end it, and the husband and wife divorcing and reconciling more than two times (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982). A woman is allowed to seek divorce in one of two ways; either through prenuptial agreement or by filing legal proceedings in a court of law.

Daneshpour (1998) pointed out that. in the dominant Anglo-American culture, the importance of separateness of the individual takes precedence over the connectedness among family members. In contrast, Muslims value unity and connectedness. "In the Muslim

community, nature is a unity” (p. 361). Harmony with nature implies the preservation of family ties. It takes precedence over individual behavior. The Muslim heritage is based on shared loyalty and strong kinship bonds.

### *Summary*

Helping families understand the subjective meanings of divorce to them seems linked to helping families gain a sense of balance and resilience. As Becvar (2006) noted, it is important to recognize that each family’s divorce experience is unique, representing different stresses and challenges. Harvey and Fine (2004) emphasized that children’s resilience is enhanced by the presence of caring adults. They observed that, when a major loss occurs, confiding feelings to others with whom one is close becomes, over time, an act of coping and adaptation.

Attending to the needs of children during times of family crisis is an obligation that generally falls on parents. However, for parents who themselves may be experiencing staggering changes, who themselves may be too numb and traumatized to grieve their losses while struggling to recover from an unexpected divorce, this may be a difficult task to fulfill. Based on an understanding of the literature about the impact of divorce on family systems, as well as understanding the needs children and parents have for resilience, helping custodial parents and their children make sense of their specific divorce experience seems critically important. When custodial parents are supported and validated to identify what meaningful experiences have occurred for them as a result of the divorce process, including changes in their day-to-day living experiences, they may be encouraged to support their children’s understandings of the divorce processes for themselves as well. A phenomenological research approach geared toward understanding meanings may be a first step toward helping custodial parents reorganize their families in ways that might lead to increased resilience.



In summary, marital dissolution as a multi-dimensional process of family change (Ahrons, 1999) has been described as a painful experience that is marked by bitterness, hurt, rage, depression, and periods of disequilibrium and emotional numbness (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987; Kaslow, 1994). Researchers (Ahrons, 1994, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Harvey, 1998; Hoge, 2002) have identified the ability to grieve the loss of a partner as key to letting go of the marriage. A complication in sudden, unexpected divorce may be that the one who is left may not react with grief but rather may react by becoming numb through the trauma which blocks the ability to grieve (Hoge, 2002; Harvey, 1998; Raphael, Middleton, Martinek, & Misso, 1993). However, little research is available pertaining to sudden, unexpected divorce versus divorce in general.

Divorce researchers, who do focus on the unilateral decision by one party to end a marriage, label that ending an abandonment (Ahrons, 1999; Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Dreman, 1991; Hoge, 2000; Kaslow & Schwartz, 1997; Sprenkle & Cyrus, 1983). Becvar (2006) considered sudden, unexpected divorce similar in character to sudden death. Although most divorce research is focused on divorce in general, including the short-and-long-term consequences for divorcing couples and for families, the goal of this research was to conjoin what we already know about the early stages of divorce alongside what is known about sudden, unexpected events and to learn what is not currently known about the effects of the two life events combined.

Based on the research reported here, it was the intention of this researcher to study an area of research that had as yet been unexplored, namely, parents whose marriage has ended through sudden, unexpected divorce. The extant literature on divorce, including empirical and research studies, is generally based on broad surveys and group averages, which preclude an

understanding of the experiences for individuals within the studies and particularly the meanings individuals place on related events. The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to explore the meanings that parents make when they and the children are abruptly left by their spouses and their children's other parents through sudden, unexpected divorces. According to Hycner (1999) the phenomenon to be studied dictates the research method to be used, including the type of participants. This study entailed purposive sampling; that is, choosing a group of participants who had had experiences related to the phenomenon to be researched. In this research study, all of the participants had experienced the phenomenon of sudden, unexpected divorce.

In this phenomenological research study, parents who had been suddenly left by their spouses in an unexpected divorce were interviewed as research participants. Through a phenomenological research design, which is a naturalistic research method, parent's subjective experiences of sudden, unexpected divorce were studied. Through a series of structured and unstructured research questions, participants described their contextual understandings and subjective meanings of the event as they experienced it. Although parents were the sole participants in this research study, participant responses embodied a systemic perspective in that parents lived within the family context which included their children. A systemic perspective recognizes that reactions and perspectives of individual family members are shaped and molded by the experiences of the whole family.

### *Phenomenological Inquiry*

In phenomenological studies, research questions are grounded in an intense interest in a particular issue or problem. A phenomenological study is one in which the essence of human experiences concerning a phenomenon is described by participants in a study (Boss, Dahl, &

Kaplan, 1996). Understanding “lived experiences” (Creswell, 1998, p. 54) involves studying a small number of research participants through extensive engagement to develop themes and to understand meanings (Moustakas, 1994). Through this process, the researcher “brackets” his or her own experiences in order to understand those of the participants (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Research questions are intended to reveal more fully the essences and meanings of the human experiences under study and to uncover qualitative rather than quantitative aspects of the event (Moustakas, 1994). Naturalistic research is a qualitative research methodology which involves collecting data in natural settings where variables are not manipulated. In naturalistic inquiry contextual factors about the topic to be researched are included as much as possible.

In a phenomenological study, research questions are generally open-ended, flexible, and broad, and then become more focused as subquestions that follow the central question. Research questions are generally centered on concepts that have not yet been identified or explored or whose relationships are insufficiently understood (Sprenkle & Moon, 1996). A researcher’s epistemology is her theory of knowledge which serves to inform how the phenomena will be studied (Groenewald, 2004). In the case of this phenomenological study, this family systems researcher approached this study having an awareness of the information that exists on the risks, trauma, and stress inherent in divorce for individuals and for families, and information that exists on the impact of the suddenness of an event on individuals and families, recognizing that very little is known about the effects that conjoining the experience of both of these events might have on parents. Likewise, awareness of a family-resilience model helped attune this researcher to issues of risk and resilience for parents and their children who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce. A family-resilience model provides an understanding of factors which enable family members to make meaning of adversity and to deal with psychosocial challenges

(Walsh, 1998). A family-resilience model examines both risk and resilience, which are important aspects of a study that explores trauma and family disorganization.

As stated previously, *how* families make sense of a crisis situation and give it meaning is an essential step toward developing a sense of resilience (Antonovsky & Sourani, 1988; Patterson & Garwick, 1994). Increased resilience in divorced parents could potentially lead to more resilient children and more resilient families. It is also hoped that greater understanding of sudden, unexpected divorce by therapists will lead to more effective work with families experiencing the transition. The central research question that guided this research study was “What sense and meanings do parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce place on the event?”

### Chapter III

#### *Overview of the Methodology*

Phenomenological research, a naturalistic approach to studying families, is enjoying a renaissance since the early 1990s (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). In phenomenological studies, the researcher identifies the “essence” (Creswell, 1998, p. 55) of individuals’ experiences surrounding a phenomenon, as described by the participants in the study.

Researchers search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the predominant underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning (Creswell, 1998). Family researchers are increasingly interested in how individual family members experience their worlds and how their perceptions of what they experience lead to different meanings (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). This phenomenological study of parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce was centered on discovering meanings that parents make of the event.

In order to ensure that ethical guidelines were followed in this research, a letter outlining the purpose of the research study and a consent agreement form was sent to each participant who expressed an interest in being part of the study. The letter and consent agreement (Appendix A) contained a clear statement that, by their signed agreements, the respondents would be participating in a research study whose purpose is to learn more about sudden, unexpected divorce. One outcome of the research included helping those who have experienced this type of divorce to understand its meaning in a more relevant way for them. Additional goals included helping others who experience this type of divorce, and helping mental health clinicians, researchers, and public policy makers understand more about this type of divorce event. Procedures that were followed, the potential benefits and risks to participants, the voluntary

nature of their participation, the participant's rights to withdraw from the research at any time without penalty in the event that they felt overwhelmed by the interview process, and the procedures that were put into place to protect confidentiality were also included (Groenewald, 2004; Moustakas, 1994).

In keeping with the phenomenological belief that families are best studied within the context of their everyday environments (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996), parents of minor children, who had experienced sudden, unexpected divorces within six months to three years of the study, were interviewed in this researcher's office. Qualitative researchers use multiple methods of gathering data that are interactive, involving their participants in data collection in ways that build rapport and credibility with individuals in a study. The actual methods of data collection, in addition to research interviews, may have included a review of family stories, family rituals, scrapbooks, letters, photographs, diaries, videos, or other memorabilia of the participant's experiences (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996; Creswell, 2003). None of these materials were received or kept by this researcher. Although children were not participants in this study, interviewing parents in the family home was an option that would have created a rich, systemic family context within which the parent (research participant) lived with her/his children. Although it was an option to be interviewed in the family home, all of the participants in this study chose to be interviewed in this researcher's office. If parents had been interviewed in their homes, they would have been requested to ensure that their children would not have been present during the research interview.

This research was guided by a contextual understanding of family- systems theory, research on divorce, by the literature on the effects of traumatic stress on individuals and families, specifically the effects of sudden, unexpected loss and ambiguous loss, themes of

family risk, and resilience. A goal of the study was to understand the psychological impact of sudden divorce on families, specifically, (1) what parents tell themselves about the events, (2) what subjective meanings they place on the events, (3) the ways that the suddenness of the unexpected event has impacted their ability to stabilize themselves, both intrapersonally and interpersonally after the event, and (4) explore any issues of trauma, stress, disorganization, and reorganization, experienced as a result of sudden, unexpected divorce.

This chapter includes exploration of issues related to sample-selection procedures, data-gathering methods, data-storing methods, trustworthiness of the findings that will emerge, and methods of data analysis.

#### *Making Contact with the Respondents*

Multiple sources were used to identify potential participants for this naturalistic study. The researcher contacted attorneys, clergy, colleagues in the mental-health professions, and single-parent groups, who might make referrals. Criteria to be considered for inclusion in this study included being the parent, mother or father, whose marriage ended in sudden, unexpected divorce from within six months to three years from the time of the study, who had minor children living in the family home. Research participants agreed to be interviewed and tape-recorded and agreed, with identity and confidentiality safeguarded, to have research findings published in a dissertation. The researcher was not affiliated with or employed by any of the potential referral sources or participants.

The participants were given basic oral and written information (see Appendix A) describing the research. A total of eight parents with minor children living in the family home having experienced sudden, unexpected divorce were included in the study. Participants who were considered for the research were contacted by the researcher for a telephone conversation at

a pre-arranged time. The purpose of this telephone meeting was to explain the research processes and to clarify and answer any questions a participant for the study might have. From the telephone conversation, including a discussion of the nature and purpose of the proposed study, the researcher determined if the parent was appropriate for the study. Appropriateness for inclusion consisted of the participant having experienced sudden, unexpected divorce within the last six months to three years, being the parent of a child or children living in the family home, willingness to be interviewed and tape-recorded on the topic of sudden, unexpected divorce, willingness to commit to the required interview lasting approximately two hours, willingness to review transcription of the interview that would be presented to the participant for validation, and willingness to have the researcher use the data in her submission of a doctoral dissertation and possible presentation or publication.

In the researcher's preliminary telephone conversation with a participant, it was explained that, after the two-hour in-person research interview, this researcher would provide him/her with a copy of a transcribed interview. Each participant was asked to carefully review the transcript to make any corrections or changes. At that time, the participant may have amended the transcript.

### *Sample Selection Procedures*

It is essential in a phenomenological study that all participants have experienced the phenomena being studied. Purposive sampling, sampling that purposefully selects participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem to be investigated (Creswell, 2007, 2003; Groenewald, 2004) works well when all individuals studied are people who have experienced the phenomenon. A focus of qualitative research -- research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification (Creswell, 1998) -- is to



purposefully select participants who will best help the researcher understand the problem to be investigated.

“The phenomenological approach lends itself to small-*n* studies in that it requires in-depth description of the experiences of each participant” (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996, p. 95).

“The size question is an equally important decision to sampling strategy in the data collection process” (Creswell, 2007, p. 126). One general guideline in qualitative research is not only to study a few individuals but also to collect extensive details about each individual studied. The intent in qualitative research is not to generalize the findings but to elucidate specifics (Creswell, 2007).

In purposive samples a certain amount of participant homogeneity is presumed because participants are chosen according to some common and specified criteria. Boyd (2001) and Dukes (1984) recommended studying two to ten subjects. Van Kaam (1959) recommended 10-25 participants be included in a study. Morse (1994) recommended at least six participants for phenomenological studies, and Creswell (1998) recommended between five and twenty-five interviews for a phenomenological study, respectively. This study will include eight research participants. Eight research participants fall within the parameter of two to ten research participants (Dukes, 1984). The important point is to richly describe the meanings of a small number of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

This in-depth study of eight research participants was accomplished through in-depth interviews with research participants lasting as long as two hours. Additionally, the researcher kept field-notes as recommended by Creswell (2007) which detailed this researcher's experiences, insights, thoughts, questions, and emotions resulting from the data-collection processes. “Memoing” (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p. 69) is another form of data collection

which becomes part of the field notes. Memoing is a process through which a researcher writes her or his thoughts, feelings, questions, and impressions through the course of collecting data and reflecting on the process with each participant. Boss, Dahl, and Kaplan (1996) indicated that “This journal might contain one’s affective responses to the data collection and to the analysis process, thoughts about connections and linkages among and between families, and observations from one’s clinical practice that relate to the study” (p. 96). Miles and Huberman (1984) emphasized the importance of dating the notes, so that the researcher can later correlate them with the research. The purpose of phenomenological research lies in accurate understanding of meanings participants place on events, and exploration of possibilities rather than generalization of findings (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996).

#### *Data-Gathering Methods*

The specific “*phenomenon*” that this researcher explored is sudden, unexpected divorce and, more particularly, the sense or meanings that parents make of the event. Kvale (1996) drew a distinction between research questions and interview questions. Bentz and Shapiro (1998) and Kensit (2000) encouraged a research process that allows the data to emerge naturally. Using the central research question as a working guideline helps structure the participant to “think and feel in the most direct ways” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Helping participants to focus on “what is going on within” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 12) facilitates participant ability to “describe the lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible” (p. 12). The central research question guiding this study was “What sense and meanings do custodial parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce place on the event?”

Specific research interview questions for participants in this proposed phenomenological study were:

## Question #1:

What sense do single parents make of divorce that was sudden and unexpected?

- a. What sense do you make of the way the marriage ended?
- b. What do you tell yourself about the sudden, unexpected way that your spouse ended the marriage?
- c. What sense do you have of yourself, having been unprepared for a sudden unexpected divorce?
- d. Did you experience your parent's divorcing in your family of origin? If so, how?

## Question #2:

What effects has the divorce had on families of sudden, unexpected divorce?

- a. What effects has the sudden divorce had on you?
- b. What effects has the sudden divorce had on the children?
- c. What did you or your ex-spouse say to the children about the divorce?
- d. How were differences handled between the two of you?
- e. What was your family life like before the divorce?
- f. What is your family life like since the divorce?

Default questions if information does not surface initially:

2 e and f: Explore 1) routines, 2) time for and types of discussions, and 3) time spent, available for children, similar or different.

## Question # 3:

What contexts and themes help families to deal with sudden, unexpected divorce?

- a. Can you turn to people in your life you used to rely on for support?

- b. What can you tell me about how you and your children are moving through the divorce?
- c. What have you found to be most helpful as you move through the divorce?
- d. What have you found to be least helpful as you move through the divorce?
- e. What can you tell me about your children's perceptions of the divorce?
- f. What can you tell me about your ability to support your children through the divorce?

Unstructured, phenomenological interviews were conducted with research participants in this study. Interview questions were directed to the participants' experiences, feelings, and beliefs about the processes of sudden, unexpected divorce. The central research question was followed by the interview questions. Interview questions in a qualitative study contain non-directional language, avoiding words that infer quantitative study such as "affect," "influence," or "impact" (Creswell, 2003). "Interview research questions are expected to evolve and change during the study in a manner consistent with the assumptions of an emerging design" (p. 107). This researcher focused on "what goes on within" the participants, with a goal of helping participants describe "the lived experience in a language as free from the constructs of the intellect and society as possible" (Groenewald, 2004, p. 12). Through this form of "*bracketing*" (i.e., a process in which participants describe their personal meanings of the event, unencumbered by any preconceived meanings they think they should be experiencing) (Groenewald, 2004), meanings of the divorce event that were relevant for research participants became known.

There is a second form of bracketing, which, according to Miller and Crabtree (1992) refers to the researcher who "must 'bracket' her/his own preconceptions and enter into the individuals' lifeworld and use the self as an experiencing interpreter" (p. 24). Moustakas (1994,

p. 85) pointed out that Husserl (1931, 1970) called this freedom from suppositions the Epoche, a Greek word meaning to stay away from or abstain. Through the interview process the researcher brackets, or sets aside, to a significant degree, past associations, understandings, facts, and biases, in order not to color or direct the interview. "In the Epoche, phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide-open sense"(Moustakas, 1994, p. 33).

Kvale (1996) stated, with regard to gathering data during the phenomenological interview, that it is truly an inter-view, an interchange of views between two people conversing about a theme of mutual interest and during which the researcher attempts to understand the world from the participant's point of view, to unfold the meaning that person makes of his or her lived experiences vis-à-vis the phenomenon that is being explored. At the root of phenomenology "the intent is to understand the phenomena in their own terms -- to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96) allowing the essence to emerge (Cameron, Schaffer, & Hyeoun-Ae, 2001; van Manen, 1990).

Besides bracketing, during all phases of the research, procedures that were used in this research after interviews were completed are those outlined by Moustakas (1994). These consist of collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon, analyzing data from taped interviews, reducing information to significant statements or quotes, and then combining statements into themes. Following that, this researcher developed a *textural description* of the experiences of the persons (what participants experienced), a *structural description* of their experiences (how they experienced it in terms of the conditions, situations and contexts), and a combination of the textural and structural descriptions to convey an overall essence of their experiences (Creswell, 2007, p. 60). Also, the use of field-notes, journaling, and

memoing during the data collection process were additional methods that enhanced bracketing, focusing on the lived experiences of the participants at all times.

### *Epoche*

My own experiences of sudden, unexpected events of loss in my life, including divorce, influenced my desire to study this specific type of divorce. I was surprised to find no studies on this topic. I commenced my research study only after going through a significant disclosure process with my Committee in order to examine how my experiences might have influenced the research process. Additionally, I have worked for many years as a marriage and family therapist with clients whose marriages ended suddenly through unexpected divorce.

Clearly, research interviews conducted for the purposes of gathering research data are vastly different from therapy. However, the notion of bracketing may be similar in research as it is in therapy. In therapy, the therapist brackets her or his common experiences in therapeutic relationships with clients, focusing on the client's material, not the therapist's. As a researcher interviewing parents who had experienced unexpected divorce, I used the strength of my own intuition about sudden, unexpected events while being focused and aware to bracket my personal experiences from those of the participants. Although my experiences with sudden, unexpected events allowed for a rich and intuitive understanding, I did my best to bracket, or set aside, specific aspects of my own events and processes in order to stay open to the experiences of participants who were discovering and understanding their own meanings, perhaps for the first time.

### *Interviews*

Dexter (1970) suggested that an interview is a conversation with a purpose. The central research question guiding the interview was: What has been your experience of sudden,

unexpected divorce?

Lincoln and Guba (1985) distinguished between structured and unstructured interviews. In the structured interview the problem is defined by the interviewer beforehand. The questions are formulated ahead of time, and the interviewee is expected to respond in terms of the interviewer's definition of the problem. The unstructured interview, on the other hand, is non-standardized, and there is a presumption that the problem of interest will be accessed from the participant's response(s) to the broad issue raised by the interviewer. Dexter (1970) defined this form of interviewing as stressing the interviewee's definition of the situation, encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation, and letting the interviewee introduce her or his notion of what is relevant. Therefore, unlike a structured interview, the researcher's focus in an unstructured interview is to highlight unique, idiosyncratic perspectives of the interviewee. Stated another way,

The structured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer knows what he or she does not know and can frame appropriate questions to find out, while the unstructured interview is the mode of choice when the interviewer doesn't know what he or she doesn't know and must rely on the respondent to tell him or her. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 269)

This phenomenological researcher used an informal, interactive process which comprised open-ended questions and comments. Although this researcher had developed questions that were intended to evoke a comprehensive account of the participant's experiences of the phenomenon, these were varied, altered, or not used at all when the participant openly shared the full story or experience of the research question (Moustakas, 1994).

Often the phenomenological interview begins with a social conversation. . . . aimed at

creating a relaxed and trusting atmosphere. Following this opening, the researcher suggests that the co-researcher take a few moments to focus on the experience, moments of particular awareness and impact, and then to describe the experience fully. The interviewer is responsible for creating a climate in which the research participant will feel comfortable and will respond honestly and comprehensively. (p. 114)

In keeping with the focus of this study, a combination of structured and unstructured interview questions was available to be used with interviewees (Appendix C). Stemming from data available indicating that sudden, unexpected events are stressful events for those experiencing them (Ahrons, 1999; Anderson, 2000; Dreman, 1991; Figley, 1988), a series of structured questions helped to focus the initial inquiry about the sudden, unexpected ending of the marriage. However, data flowing from that structured line of questioning can be considered unstructured in that the researcher does not know what the idiosyncratic responses of each participant will be. Since the nature of what makes an event traumatic or not is a subjective response to an event, each individual participant reacted differently to the same event. This researcher had no knowledge of these data and relied on the participants to tell her.

Immediately after leaving each interview, this researcher set aside 20 to 30 minutes to journal and to reflect on what was revealed through the interview. Journaling, or the recording of self-reflection, consists of the researcher's field notes, recording what the researcher has heard, seen, experienced, thought, and felt in the course of collecting the data and reflecting on the process. The researcher's journal of reflections after each interview contained the record of the subjective experiences the researcher had of the research participant's experiences. This became another source of data that was used in the research analyses (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996; Creswell, 1998; Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher's journal also became another form



of bracketing, separating any researcher bias from the facts as those were reported by research participants in the study (Miller and Crabtree, 1992).

### *Recording Data*

In phenomenological research the in-person interview is the primary method through which data are collected on the topic and question (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological interviews in this project involved informal, interactive processes utilizing open-ended questions and responses which were digitally recorded with consent. The digital tape recording was downloaded to a CD. The CD was labeled with a pseudo-name and number that I assigned to it to protect the anonymity of the participants. The date of the interview was labeled on the CD. Once the data was collected, they were transcribed by this researcher. The CD's, along with all journals, notes, and memoing used by this researcher were kept in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office to which only the researcher has access. They will be retained there for three years.

### *Data-Analyses Procedures:*

In analyzing data, this researcher focused on creating accurate understandings of participants' experiences through a line-by-line analysis of the interview. This researcher was focused on significant words or phrases as well as on more global impressions of thoughts and themes that occurred. These data were gathered through research questions that asked participants to describe their lived experiences of sudden, unexpected divorce. This information was augmented by this researcher through journaling and memoing after each interview to record thoughts, impressions, and questions the researcher was left with.

Moustakas (1994) outlined methods of data analysis for phenomenological studies. In working with the van Kaam method (1959) the following steps were taken after obtaining a

complete transcript for each research participant family.

(1) Listing and preliminary grouping: I chose statements from the transcript that described the participant's experience of sudden, unexpected divorce. I made a list of every expression the participant made that was relevant to the divorce experience. Research responses were horizontalized, a process through which statements that are made through the research are identified and listed. Every horizon or statement relevant to sudden, unexpected divorce has equal value.

(2) Reduction and elimination: I tested each statement for two requirements: (a) Does it contain a moment of the divorce experience that is a necessary and sufficient to understand it? (b) Is it possible to abstract and label it? If yes, it was a horizon of the experience that contained information and meaning about the participant's experience of sudden, unexpected divorce. If not, it was eliminated. The horizons that remained were the invariant constituents of the experience.

(3) Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents: I determined the meanings or essence of the participant's experience of sudden, unexpected divorce and form, from those meanings, clusters of themes. The clustering of themes formed the basis for the structural description.

(4) Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application: I checked the invariant constituents and themes that accompanied them against the complete record of the participant. I determined that they were explicitly stated in the transcription and that they were compatible. If they were not explicitly stated or compatible, they were not relevant to the participant's experience and were deleted.

(5) Using the relevant, validated, invariant constituents and themes, I constructed a

textural description of the experience for each participant, including verbatim examples from the transcribed interview. A textural description represents *what* was experienced by the participant, which meaning is understood through a summation of clusters of meaning.

(6) Clustering themes that describe what the participant experienced as meaningful leads to a structural description. A structural description represents a general description of clusters of meaning that describe *how* the participant experienced whatever she or he did.

(7) I constructed for each participant a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. From the participant's textural-structural descriptions, I developed a composite description of the meanings and essences of the experience as reported by the participant. I recognized that a single, unifying meaning of the experience exists.

(8) A final step for this phenomenological researcher, after analysis of the data, was to summarize the data and to consider its limitations. This researcher returned to the literature review and distinguished her findings from earlier research, outlined a future research project that would expand research on the topic further, and discussed outcomes of the research in terms of social meanings and implications as well as in terms of personal and professional values.

*Verification:*

In order to verify the quality of this phenomenological study, I anticipated engaging in four procedures – clarifying researcher bias from the beginning of the study through bracketing, clarifying participant meanings by doing member checks during the course of the research interview (Sandelowski, 2008), peer debriefing, and rich, thick descriptions. However, peer debriefing was not utilized as this researcher worked closely on research findings and data analyses with her committee member, Dr. Ben Beitin. Continuous and frequent consultation

with Dr. Beitin through the research process enhanced trustworthiness of the study.

The purpose of phenomenology is to understand individual's experiences of events through their own voices. This is why bracketing the researcher's preconceptions is an important step in phenomenology, ensuring that only the participant's voice is heard. Also, member checking may be conceived as an instrument of validation. When researchers ask participants to elaborate on, or to clarify what they have said in interviews, or when they sum up what they have heard at the end of an interview, member checking becomes a valuable means of authenticating the meanings that participants report during the interview (Sandelowski, 2008, p. 501-502). A third procedure to ensure the trustworthiness of a study is peer debriefing. Polkinghorne (cited in Creswell, 1998) reported that a study has validity if its ideas and findings are well-grounded and supported in the research. In phenomenological methodology, structural descriptions and connections are found in participant's statements which are collected during the interview. The role of a peer debriefer is to achieve intersubjective agreement of the data analyzed through the research. If multiple observers agree on the explication of the research data as described through the participant's description of the phenomenon, their collective judgment creates objectivity and intersubjective agreement of the data. This leads to increased trustworthiness of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In-depth, rich descriptions of the experience of sudden, unexpected divorce for those who have experienced the event provided an accurate picture of the experience for those participants. Words, phrases, and statements contained in the transcript were tied to the research, forming the basis for rich, thick descriptions of the sudden, unexpected divorce event.

## CHAPTER IV

### Findings

#### *Introduction*

The findings in this chapter emerged from data acquired through semistructured interviews that were conducted with eight participants who had experienced sudden, unexpected divorce. The purpose of this chapter is to illuminate the experiences of these eight participants, and, to a lesser extent, the experiences of their children. Each of the participants allowed me to share in the uncensored pain and devastation they experienced as they grappled with a reality they never anticipated or even thought about on the day of the wedding, that is, that it takes two to make a marriage, but only one to end it.

This study is based on in-depth interviews with eight parents from a Northeast U. S. suburban area. The research question was designed to explore what sense and meanings parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce place on the event. Subquestions were focused on what meanings parents make of divorce that was unexpected, what effects the divorce has on families, and what contexts and themes help families to deal with sudden, unexpected divorce. Specifically, this chapter contains a description of the participants, demographic data, case studies for each of the participants, and a discussion of themes and subthemes that emerged from the data.

Each participant established a structure that was most cohesive for telling one's own story. Themes and subthemes that are discussed in this chapter were gained directly from participant interviews in which each of the participants discussed reactions to and experiences of sudden, unexpected divorce in vivid detail. The case studies contained in this chapter are

focused on specific themes that emerged from verbatim transcripts of the interviews. In many cases, quoted excerpts from those interviews are included to illustrate participant experiences.

### *Participants*

As stated earlier, this study included eight spouses whose marriages ended in sudden, unexpected divorce. The participants were chosen from a nonclinical population in a Northeast U. S. suburban area. The participants met the following inclusion criteria: (a) Parents, mother or father, whose marriage ended in sudden, unexpected divorce from within six months to three years from the time of the study, (b) living with minor children in the family home, (c) not living with any other adults in the home, and (d) not remarried.

The number of years that participants were married ranged from 9 to 30 years. All were college graduates, four held Master's-level degrees, and all had school-aged children still residing in the family home. Children living in the home ranged in ages from four to fifteen, with one participant having grown children living outside of the home. Six of the participants were mothers, and two were fathers (see Table 1 for demographic information).

Table 1  
Demographic Data - Participant Parents, Sudden, Unexpected Divorce

Name	Number of Years Married	Number of Children	Ages of Children at Time of Separation	Time Between Separation and Interview	Highest Degree
"Amy"	16	Two	12; 14	6 months	BA
"Brad"	9	Two	4; 6 6; 7	9 months 6 months	MA
"Cathy"	12	Two	(1 other deceased)		BA
"Diane"	30	Five	15; 17; 21 24; 26	9 months	BS
"Emma"	16	Three	3; 8; 13; 17	9 months	MA
"Frank"	22	Three	10; 13; 17	2 years	MBA
"Grace"	20	Two	16; 18	2 years	BA
"Heather"	17	One	10	3 years	MA

In the section that follows, a case study of each of the participants is presented. These case studies offer in-depth discussions of each of the participants' experiences with the sudden ending of their marriages through sudden, unexpected divorce as well as themes that were revealed through the data analysis of each.

### *Themes that Emerged*

Four main themes emerged through participant interviews as they recounted their stories of sudden, unexpected divorce and the impact of the event on them and their children. These themes included, I Thought I was Married Forever; From Best Friend to Total Stranger – Another Whole Side Emerged I Never Knew Was There; A Simultaneous Process of Dying – While Living; and Meaning Making, a Constant Process of Deconstruction and Reconstruction.

### *Amy*

#### *Demographics*

Amy had been married for sixteen years to her spouse, had a Bachelor's Degree, and had two children ages twelve and fourteen. Amy was of European American descent.

#### *Case Study*

Amy gave a history of the couple's entire relationship, starting with their dating days. It was clear that Amy was selective about her choice of mate from the beginning, placing specific emphasis on mutual connections the couple had, work, and particulars. She stated "Our first date was on my brother's birthday. I found out he was in the same union that my uncle and cousins were in and that his sister actually dated my cousin." Family members giving their nod of approval helped Amy feel more comfortable moving forward. Family and friend connections

enhanced Amy's feelings of security and connection to her partner as they developed their dating relationship. They dated nearly four years prior to getting married.

Additionally, Amy felt that her partner's family loved and accepted her very much. She expressed strong feelings, especially toward her partner's mother. She observed "she really liked me. She loved me actually. I had a great relationship with his Mom." Amy's father had died of cancer when she was 17, and during their courtship her partner's mother had cancer. Amy stated, "His mom was in remission of cancer when I met him. My father had a brain tumor and died when I was 17 year's old, so I felt like I kind of connected there." It was clear, as Amy told her story, that the security she felt in the early relationship with her future spouse allowed her to move forward into a fully trusting relationship with him.

Amy's own family was a tight knit group and prior to marriage, it was clear to Amy that her partner's intentions for their future life together was to be a close family as well. She believed her husband when he repeated many times during their marriage that he would never divorce or leave her or the boys the way that his father left him. He told her that "He wanted to be more like his brother who has four kids and is happily married."

Amy described her own family's ritual of "family night." She vividly, and proudly, described how her partner intended to ask her to marry him in the presence of her family at one such "family night." She stated:

He wanted to do it in front of them. At first I was shocked. I didn't think he would do it!

And it's so hard now --- because you can remember it so clearly. (Amy cried as she recalled this earlier event.)

The couple got married, and Amy's mother-in-law died eighteen days later. Amy observed, "It was her goal to make it to our wedding."



Married life found the couple living responsibly with values that they chose and cherished. Amy spoke many times during the course of the interview about strong, shared family values the couple established. These became the foundation of their marriage. It was the identification of these strong values and the way the couple brought them alive in their relationship that revealed a theme of believing they were married forever.

After an early miscarriage, the couple brought their first child into the world three years later. A second child was born two years after that. Amy described how the couple built their life around their children as together they were very involved in community activities. She stated, "We did everything with our kids, everything. Then we would spend date night on Friday nights together, put the kids to bed and enjoy dinner by ourselves."

It was evident as Amy fast-forwarded through the events of their family life now that her pain was not only for herself, but for her children as well. Amy, similar to all of the participants, demonstrated a keen sense of awareness for the plight of the children while going through many tumultuous changes brought on by the sudden divorce that none of them expected. She stated

We did everything – baseball games, basketball games. We went to church every week; we sat in the same pew every week. We held hands every week in front of everybody; he told me how much he loved me every week in church. We prayed together. He never missed dinner; we had dinner together every night. We said our prayers at night. We used to pray the rosary for Lent. This whole entire time "I'll never be like my dad. I'll never be like my dad." And the kids had heard that for 12 years, 14 years.

Amy tearfully attempted to make sense of it all.

Amy vividly recalled a benchmark conversation in her marriage. This was the moment where her relationship had a decidedly different feeling to it. This occurred shortly after the

couple celebrated their sixteenth wedding anniversary. She recalled that something felt wrong. She expressed this to her husband who snapped back at her, blaming her.

Noting that this was such a total departure from their normal interactions, Amy assumed full responsibility for it. She responded to this out-of-sorts interaction between the couple by thanking him for telling her how he felt.

Amy's husband left for a training program the following week for one week. She sent him an email stating, "Remember, I always love you." She recalled receiving very limited phone calls from him while he was gone, which was out of character for the couple's relationship, but on no level did she connect the uncomfortable interaction between them the week before with little contact now. This unfailing belief in what their relationship had always been precluded any awareness of what might be coming now. Amy's inability to make these connections revealed a subtheme of believing the best, discovering the worst. Amy stated that she thought everything was okay, but she and her children recognized with hindsight that her husband actually seemed different right before Christmas. .

Amy continued to observe that when he got home from the training he still did not seem right. He hugged and kissed her, he said he missed her, but something still did not feel right. Then at a carnival, he abruptly stopped holding her hand when another couple arrived on the scene. Amy did not understand what that was about.

After what Amy described as a stressful week without time for a whole lot of communication between them, Amy looked forward to their relaxation time together on Saturday morning. It was then that she brought up the prior email message she had sent her husband, reminding him that she will always love him. His response shattered her. Her husband told her at that moment that he no longer loved her. And he no longer wanted to be married to her.

At this point in the interview Amy sobbed. She sobbed, recalling the exact moment and the enormity of the event. The emotional blow to Amy was palpable. The trauma Amy experienced in that conversation was vivid. This was six months after the couple physically separated. Amy explained how her whole life unraveled at that moment. Hope undying, she prayed the moment would pass and that her husband would change his mind.

However, through a series of next steps that Amy took she recognized that her spouse had been in contact with an old girlfriend. This new information revealed beginnings of a theme of moving from best friend to total stranger. Amy increasingly felt that she no longer knew her husband, greatly exacerbating feelings of trauma, ambiguous loss, and shattered assumptions.

The day after telling Amy he no longer wanted to be married, her husband failed to join Amy and their children for church services as he was accustomed to doing. The children asked Amy why. She encouraged them to ask him. When he responded that he would not be joining them, but would go on his own, the boys grew wary. Amy told the children that her husband said he no longer loved her and that he no longer wanted to be married. From there, they kicked and screamed, and ran into the house to confront him. After that she told them that, although she did not know what was going on, they were going to the right place to deal with this. Amy recalled

We went to church, and we pretty much cried all day. We talked to father for a few minutes and he said "This is not your fault boys. This is not your mom's fault. This is something your dad has to work out." And at that time I really thought we would work it out.

When she and the children got home, Amy's husband was gone. The children called to see where he was, but their father told them they did not need to know. They pushed harder, saying they had a right to know, and he eventually told them where he was.

On Sunday night when her husband got home, Amy confronted him with her knowledge about the other woman. Amy had found evidence revealing that he first made contact with this third party shortly after their sixteenth wedding anniversary. Amy was tearful looking back on an anniversary that she had no reason to doubt at the time they celebrated it. She stated, "It just seems like a blur after that. The knot in my stomach was so bad as well as the knot in the kid's stomachs."

Amy continued to describe vast changes in the man that she loved and thought she knew. These included times he told her he was in one place, but Amy believed he was with the other woman. Her sense of loss and her sense of not knowing how to be without their previous structure shook her greatly. Amy was at a loss to know what to say to her sons. They were old enough to understand exactly what was happening. Amy's reaction to her husband reflected her own personal loss as well as loss for their children. That is, Amy and the children were feeling great pain which led to intense family upheaval. Amy agonized over the fact that her sons were exposed to this loss. She agonized as well over the fact that her husband no longer spent long periods of quality time with their sons as he previously did.

Amy recalled that the boys were having a really hard time. She made arrangements for them to spend the weekend with friends or family, and Amy herself spent the night away. The next day she received an email from her husband saying that he decided to move out. She stated that as much as this move distressed her greatly, she also felt a sense of peace. Her husband was such a different person who, for four months, barely had any contact with their sons. They would call him, but he wouldn't talk to them. Amy and her children felt depressed and immobilized by the sudden changes, and Amy believed it was better that he decided to move out. In fact, Amy's sons wanted him to move out.

Amy reported that, on their wedding anniversary, she was served divorce papers. Prior to that, the couple had discussed attending a marriage-education weekend for couples. Still having a measure of hope that their marriage could be saved, she called and asked her husband if he still planned to attend. When he responded that he was, Amy felt heartened and hopeful despite the divorce papers she had just been served. However, Amy's hope was short-lived. Two days later her husband informed Amy that he was pursuing his relationship with the other woman.

Amy, similar to other participants, eventually began piecing information together. With hindsight, she saw more than she ever wished to see. She recognized that, instead of being where he said he was several weekends before, he was actually helping the other woman, Erin, move into an apartment. Amy was following a sequence of events on Facebook and gleaned information from that source as well, all of which helped her recognize the enormity of the situation she was involved in. A combination of having no decision making in a sudden, unexpected divorce, coupled with learning the duplicity of the man she loved, led to feelings of powerlessness and personal annihilation for Amy, who appeared traumatized by the loss of her previously long-held assumptions. Facing her husband's sudden abandonment of all Amy believed the couple and family stood for, Amy felt shattered. These shattered assumptions led to another theme, moving from best friend to total stranger. Rapidly changing events led quickly to the emergence of yet another theme, a simultaneous process of dying – while living.

Amy's discovery of her husband's infidelity, alongside loss of prior views she held of him for sixteen years, represented a traumatic loss for her. Not only was she reeling from the recognition that there was so much about her husband that she did not know, but she struggled with the cruelty that this "human induced victimization" (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, p. 78) imposed on her. Amy could not reconcile her subjective experiences of the husband she knew and loved

with the husband who did this to her. Recognizing the extent to which her partner changed, and how she had unwittingly been manipulated into believing him through mixed messages and mind games that, with hindsight, she recognized had been going on for a period of time, devastated her. A huge part of Amy was dying – while the other part of her needed to keep on living. Amy tearfully captured her subjective experiences of dying by exclaiming that she felt as if she had been drowning! In a pile-up of losses, Amy's world view and trusted assumptions that she lived day in and day out for sixteen years were shattered.

Amy stated that the children were very much affected by the changes in their father. Not only were they a close family, but Amy and her sons enjoyed a particularly close relationship. Their older son refused visitation with his father. The younger child visited a few times. Before Christmas Amy's husband asked the younger son for a Christmas list. The child put what he wanted on that list, but on Christmas Day there were no presents. The day after Christmas a gift was left on the back porch. The younger son recognized the wrapping paper. The gift was a large basketball hoop for the driveway that needed assembling. Their dad left no note offering to help with assembly or worse, Amy observed, nothing that even identified him as the gift giver. Amy's oldest son assembled it, crying. On the one hand, he was proud of himself for his accomplishment. On the other hand, he was upset because this was not even a gift his younger brother had even put on his Christmas list. Amy's younger son was equally sad and disappointed. He was the one who visited their dad; he was the one who made a Christmas list, yet he was the one who received no gifts.

Amy stated that, in addition to spending much less time spent with the boys, information was given to them that they then checked out with Amy. An example of this included their father telling the boys that he was spending Thanksgiving with a long-lost friend. When the

boys told Amy this, she responded, “That’s funny, I never heard of anyone by that name. In all the years, I’ve never heard daddy say that name.” Amy was very clear through the interview that she was immensely aware that, based on husband’s betrayal, “trust” was a fragile issue for the boys. She felt strongly that the truth was being distorted by their father with them, and it was her intention to maintain the solid trust relationship with her sons that they had always enjoyed. Therefore, Amy had no conflict letting them know that she knew of no friend by the name her husband identified.

In another instance, when the older boy asked Amy straightforward if his father had a girlfriend, Amy at first replied “I don’t know.” Amy stated that she did not want to admit it. However, after talking to her therapist, it was advised that she “not lie to him because, if you do, he’s never going to trust you.” This response was cohesive for Amy, who wanted to preserve a trusting relationship with her sons. Later, Amy told her son the truth. She said,

I need to talk to you because I don’t want to lie to you. I want to be honest with you. I said “Daddy has a girlfriend.” And he cried like a baby, screaming, carrying on. And he said “How do you know? And how long have you known?” And I said “Daddy just made it known.”

Amy stated that her younger son had seen an email from a woman sent to his father. He found this email left on the table at his father’s apartment, actually a note with a recipe. Her son went on to a Facebook page where he saw more information, but concluded this was a friend, not a girlfriend. Eventually the older son, who was struggling with his father’s disloyalty and betrayal, took it upon himself to tell his younger brother the truth about their father’s relationship with another woman. This younger son was devastated, still believing that his father was working to save the marriage.

Through each of the interviews, including this one, a strong process of deconstruction and reconstruction emerged through the narrative telling of participant's stories. Amy, shifting rapidly between what life previously was to what it was now, lived in a constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction. She struggled to make sense of any of it. She sobbed, recognizing how she had been deceived and lied to. She blamed herself for looking for security in the marriage. Through all of this profound loss, Amy's foundation for meaning reconstruction involved the family's original values, that is, putting her children first. Additional sub-themes of faith, spirituality, and support of family and friends were clear as Amy moved toward resolution of the sudden, unexpected divorce.

Sadly, another significant stressor unexpectedly emerged for Amy through the process of divorce. This involved the loss of a counseling relationship that at one time represented trust and support for her. Amy felt that she and her sons originally benefited greatly from this counseling relationship. However, the relationship eventually became a potent stressor as Amy believed that she and her children were betrayed through the process.

Initial counseling sessions had included Amy and her husband. After marital sessions ended, Amy's husband continued to see the therapist individually. Amy stated that she had a "very bad session where I felt like she had completely twisted that I had done everything right. My focus was in the right place, to, you are now damaging your kids by not seeing their father." It was during this time that Amy experienced a shift in the therapist's loyalties to her husband. Amy was devastated. It was clear that the most of the devastation she experienced surrounding this event was directly linked with her hopes and beliefs that the marriage could yet be saved. Amy believed that had her husband been given the same clear and consistent messages of responsibility for ending the marriage that he had been given in earlier counseling, without a



shifting of loyalties that she perceived later, he might have seen what he was doing and returned home, thus preventing divorce. Amy also recognized that, upon her husband attending counseling individually, she (Amy) was blamed for her son's refusal to visit with his father, which Amy vehemently protested. Not only did Amy resent being held accountable for her son's feelings, but she also objected to the fact that her son's feelings were discounted as if they were not his own. Amy's work of deconstruction and reconstruction was burdened and interfered with by this additional stressor. Her emotional energy toward meaning-making in her divorce was derailed and diverted by this relationship becoming a burden, one in which Amy found herself protecting and defending herself from the effects of counseling. The effects on her sons were significant as well. Any family meaning-making that Amy and the boys had been working on together was sabotaged from Amy's perspective.

As the interview came to an end, Amy identified financial insecurity as a major source of stress for her. As her divorce settlement was being finalized, Amy reflected that her marriage had diminished into a business deal. Emotionally, she and the children continued to grapple with the lack of trust and understanding they felt with a spouse and father. From the children's perspective Amy explained, "It's everything. It's everything that comes out of his mouth. They look at me, and they say, 'Is it true?'"

Of her faith Amy tearfully acknowledged she would not have survived the loss of her marriage without it.

### *Researcher's Experience*

Amy was referred to this research study by a member of her children's carpool. She was the first participant interviewed for the study.

As a researcher interested in exploring the effects of sudden, unexpected divorce, I became immediately aware of the openness and brokenness Amy manifested through telling her story. Her experience was as real and vivid for her on this day of this interview as it was six months prior when her marriage came to a screeching halt.

I felt sorry for Amy as she wrestled with feelings of injustice not only through the loss of an important counseling relationship, but with further feelings of victimization she experienced through being blamed for her sons' reactions. This jumped out at me because I had previously heard dynamics similar to this from clients over the years. It made me realize how, based on distasteful feedback certain clients may receive, dynamics are turned around to where the "victim" is then framed as the "victimizer." It made me reflect on my work with clients and how I might be more aware if this were ever happening. With little probing, Amy's narrative became her own *evidence-based* story of deconstruction and reconstruction. Amy was working hard to dismantle prior cognitive and mental mindsets of her husband and their lived marriage. Simultaneously and with hindsight that included many references to a history of divorce in her husband's extended family, Amy reconstructed a narrative that helped her seek to make sense of what happened.

Wanting to be true to the process of phenomenology, specifically the process of *epoche*, I bracketed my own thoughts and impressions as Amy told her story, keeping myself in check not to steer or guide the interview in any direction as Amy continued.

Since Amy was the first research participant, I found myself overly concerned with "technology" issues, concerned that the heating system frequently running may blur her words on the recording. This concern was eventually ruled out by stopping the recording and listening to a sample of the tape until I felt reassured we were on track!

I found myself drawing on my experience as an evaluator, which role is vastly different from the role of therapist. I was aware during times of Amy's immense pain how I might have responded were I her therapist versus the way that I responded in a researcher role. To that end, I was grateful to have read information about the qualitative interview process in advance.

At the conclusion of the interview, which was the longest at two full hours, Amy thanked me for the opportunity to tell her story. She indicated that it helped her to hear herself and to put what happened into perspective. Especially being the first participant, this was meaningful for me to hear. For all of the pain and trauma that she relived through retelling this very personal and subjective experience, I was grateful that she could see a value for the time she spent and for what was accomplished.

### *Brad*

#### *Demographics*

Brad had been married for nine years to his spouse, had a Master of Arts degree and had two children ages 4 and 6. Brad was of European American descent.

#### *Case study*

Brad stated that a few years ago, his spouse came to him rather suddenly, telling him that she did not feel special. He immediately responded positively to his wife, wanting to know more about what the problem was and what he could do to help fix it.

Initially, Brad's genuine desire to improve himself and the marriage were not responded to positively. But after some discussion, each of them came up with a list of what they could do to improve the relationship. This was encouraging to Brad. And, true to his word, he took many steps to fulfill his part of creating change.

Many times during the interview Brad stated his perception that the couple had a great family. He was serious-minded about marriage and about wanting to fix any problems. Even after hearing his wife say she had fallen out of love with him and not sure if she could get it back, Brad continued to believe they would surmount their problems. This belief was based on the fact that there was nothing “obviously” wrong between them, no arguing and nothing he had previously heard that reflected complaints his wife had about him. It was during this phase of early identification of problems made by his wife that Brad revealed a common theme, believing he was married forever. Together, he believed they would overcome these issues.

While believing the couple was married forever, Brad found evidence that some aspect was terribly amiss in the relationship. Confronting his wife with information he found that cast doubts for him on her fidelity and being reassured by her that there was absolutely no reason to doubt or distrust her fidelity in the marriage, Brad did not dwell on what he had seen. In fact, Brad stated that on Valentine’s Day he got her flowers and wrote a heartfelt card apologizing for any hurt he caused her by doubting her. He stated that she responded with a loving card in return.

Encouraged by belief that they were on the right track, Brad was stunned by what occurred next. A message that Brad intercepted between his wife and another man had actually been exchanged even before the loving note she sent to Brad after Valentine’s Day. Once again, Brad’s wife dismissed any significance in the message, almost fostering guilt in Brad for considering the worst in her.

After that, Brad described that his wife began going out a lot in the evenings, mostly under the guise of meeting a female friend for a few drinks. However, he often wound up texting

her when midnight came and she was not home. His wife continued to make a whole host of excuses for her changed behavior.

Trying to make sense of what was happening and clearly experiencing significant distress of ambiguous loss and shattered assumptions, Brad experienced self-doubts about himself. He also began keeping track of his wife's late-night expeditions. Brad struggled with his own awareness that he had not had many other long-term relationships. He seemed to believe that were he more experienced in relationships, this may not be happening to him. Brad, like many of the other research participants, became filled with self-doubt upon the recognition that something was wrong, questioning if he might be the cause of the problems. Feelings of self-deprecation initially held him back from being more assertive with his wife. But the more Brad perceived changes in his wife, the more he realized he was not the problem. Eventually Brad's wife told him she no longer loved him and that the marriage was over.

Brad, like many other participants, continued to hold on to hope even after his spouse uttered the dreaded divorce words. The period of time was tense, and Brad felt insecure not knowing how to "be." Brad made another attempt to be affectionate and caring toward his wife, only to be pushed away harder this time with a request that he move out. Brad complied.

Reeling from feelings of confusion, emptiness, and the pain of ambiguous loss, Brad could not envision that this was the same woman he married. Brad moved through the theme of originally seeing his wife as his best friend to someone he no longer knew. Recognizing that he no longer knew her helped him conceptualize and contextualize the mixed messages, mind games, lies, deception, and duplicity he was living through. Brad experienced not only divorce, but the traumatic ending of his previously held assumptive world view. Brad struggled as he recognized the betrayal and duplicity he encountered in his wife.

As stated earlier, Brad was initially self-conscious about his lack of experience in other long-term relationships. But through a helpful counseling relationship and a bevy of friends, Brad subsequently became savvy to the duplicity of his wife. In fact, once he realized that the relationship was definitely over, Brad pulled in the reins, no longer being guided or led by his wife. He recalled,

Back in April when she first dropped the bomb, she said, "This is difficult because you're not a jerk." She would make comments like she did think I'm a good dad. So then she was wanting to do the \$199 divorce thing. Just go somewhere, boom, done. And I didn't want to do that because I was doing research. We went to a mediator. And at the first session I came completely prepared with all these notes and questions, and she basically had nothing. She was unprepared. I said I want the kids half time, 50% of the time. Not where I'd be a weekend dad. She said she'd have to think about custody. She was trying to say it's better for the kids to wake up in the same place every morning to go to school. Then I said I want the kids 100% of the time, but I'll settle for 50% of the time. Then she caved on that within the next two days.

On one occasion, when Brad's wife left her laptop in open view, Brad learned more than he ever wanted to know. It was then that he knew that his wife had been unfaithful for a very long time. He was crushed not just by the facts, but by the duplicity and manipulation that he recognized he had been caught up in. As Brad's image and beliefs about his wife and their marriage were destroyed, his assumptions about her shattered, Brad worked hard to face reality and to become fully realistic about his situation. His sole focus after his discovery became the well-being of his young children. Brad was a child-centered father who loved spending time with his children. And he made it his goal to fight hard to have shared custody of them. He

would do anything to protect them—and he took steps that helped him be guided toward maximizing his time with them.

This included getting a lawyer who was a “real straight shooter.” Brad spent Father’s Day printing out all the found email messages as “evidence.” Even then, his wife continued to play mind games, attempting to engage him and bait him. Brad saw the cruelty, but remained intentionally strong. He observed “I never told her anything about what I knew, although my lawyer told her lawyer that we were aware there were multiple paramours.”

Brad’s divorce was finalized last year. He still did not tell her what he knew. In a strategic way Brad withheld this information. The couple still owned a house together that would be sold in the near future, and Brad wanted information to hold over her head.

Through the narrative process, the deconstruction of Brad’s life so vividly portrayed by him through the interview process also revealed beginnings of a reconstruction phase. His assumptive world shattered, Brad talked about the role of counseling in his life and the help he had gained. He expressed incredulity that a woman who appeared as family oriented as his wife could turn out to be duplicitous and deceptive as she was. Brad talked about his own parents’ fifty-year marriage. Although there were tough times between them, they stayed together. With hardly any fighting between him and his wife, and with his wife swearing to him that she would never be unfaithful, Brad grew stronger as he recognized the terrible deceit and betrayal she had imposed on him. It was an agonizing process, revealing the essence of the fourth theme, a simultaneous process of dying – while living. Brad’s innocence and trust died while his spirit to live for his children became strengthened. .

Brad revealed that when it was time to tell the children, he allowed his wife to do the talking. The children were tearful but were quickly reassured that they would be living in the house with Brad. They also felt reassured to know that their mom would live nearby.

### *Researcher's Experience*

Brad was referred for this research interview by his therapist. At first he appeared tense, but, after beginning to tell his story, Brad became more visibly comfortable. As he detailed the many ways that he experienced mind games and mixed messages, one thing was clear: Brad was self-conscious and all-too-aware of not having a lot of experiences in relationships. That self-consciousness initially flowed into the early interview, but, as it progressed, Brad became more relaxed, and I was happy for him. I was aware that Brad looked and sounded as if he could use some encouragement, but I held back not wanting to blur any boundaries. I felt bad for Brad with the horrific first experience he had of marriage. He seemed like such a good person, and it made me sad to see him become hardened in this way. I was sensitive to the huge risk he took by exposing his many emotions to me, a complete stranger, through the interview. As he eased up and grew more comfortable, I felt better too. The more Brad heard himself and his story through the narrative process, the more he seemed to understand himself. And the more he understood himself, the less critical and responsible he seemed to feel. I was happy to provide Brad with a safe spot to hear himself. I put myself in his shoes and could only begin to imagine how vulnerable he felt. When the interview was over, Brad expressed his gratitude for the experience.

*Cathy*

### *Demographics*



Cathy had been married to her husband for twelve years, had a Bachelor's Degree, and had two children ages six and seven. Cathy had another young child, a daughter, who had previously died. Cathy was of European American descent.

### *Case Study*

Cathy revealed that her marriage ended in sudden, unexpected divorce six months earlier. The sense and meaning she made of the event was that life became too tough for her husband. She believed that the hardships of life, including financial, led to his walking away. Cathy acknowledged that the prior death of a child "spearheaded" a change in their marriage.

Cathy detailed the many ways that she accommodated the needs of her husband to the point of exclusion of her own needs. She loved him a lot, and she detailed specific reasons for the bond. Among them was his ability to live in the moment, to enjoy life, and to rarely become stressed. Cathy explained his uncanny ability to have life fall into place for him and for them. She felt attracted to these qualities, describing herself as a woman who liked to succeed. She also was someone who worried about many things that he did not, so she admired his ways of coping through life.

Cathy also described their earlier lifestyle together as one of escaping life's problems. This is something she observed they had the luxury of doing when they were younger. However, as life got more complicated, her husband continued escaping and running from life versus toward it. Although Cathy knew this, she stated that she loved him so much that she overlooked it. She recognized at some point that life was no longer thrilling for him, nor was she. She noted that in their earlier relationship her husband was very financially secure versus later on when he experienced a number of job losses and financial reversals. As a result of these reversals, Cathy indicated that he could no longer run. She added that her husband's value system and priorities

in life also became skewed during the period of time he was not dealing with the reversals in his life. Despite his ways, Cathy's belief in him revealed a first theme of believing they were married forever.

All along, Cathy knew that her husband was involved in substance abuse. In fact, she stated that, for three years after the death of their daughter, he gambled. Yet Cathy described him as her rock during that period of loss after her daughter died. She described how strong her love felt for him at that time, seeing a side of him that she never knew was there. She also held on to the hopes that she would see and experience more of what she loved in him.

Cathy had hopes that with the worst of his life reversals behind him, he would "wake up and smell the coffee." By then the couple had two children. Cathy anticipated that his next steps would reveal a major re-evaluation of his life. However, to her dismay, when things did not fall into place as he expected, he began to run again. Despite her hopes, Cathy felt sorry for him and allowed her needs to be completely ignored. He seemed oblivious to the relationship she was waiting for. Her observations were captured when she said,

He thought him just allowing me to buy anything I wanted, and making all my decisions, that would make me happy. He's the kind of guy if you stay in the bar until 10 o'clock and say you're done, in the beginning he'd say okay, but in the end he became a bastard.

He'd say "I don't care, I'm staying out, go get a ride home."

Cathy acknowledged that she only knew "dribs and drabs" about the extent of his substance abuse, but she knew that he was "a pot smoker every day. I believe that allowed him to have that mentality of let me just smoke and life won't seem as heavy."

When Cathy's husband did not pull his life together after many reversals, she described that a "crossroads came. He decided to go one way. I decided to go another way." Cathy described this period in their life.

I think he basically decided to take a very dark path. He decided to run from his pain.

And I think he got so far from who he was, that he said it's just too much work to turn back. I don't even think he knew how. He's searching for something that he doesn't even know.

It was at this point in the interview that Cathy revealed a second theme, believing the best, discovering the worst. Cathy discovered her husband's affair. She stated, "I think the affair had a lot to do with him thinking, you know, that feeling, that childish feeling of meeting someone at a bar and hanging out with her."

Cathy even managed to get beyond her husband's affair which lasted about one year. She described the shallowness of his relationship with this other woman. She described his safe and calculated way of becoming involved with a married woman, which was more based on attention and constant texting than it was on emotional involvement. She saw his affair as another escape. She recalled her husband "having sex in cars and getting a hotel room that was all involved around drinking. He was drunk all the time." She described her husband's priorities as moving away from love of family to one of instant gratification.

Cathy continued to focus on her husband's needs while minimizing her own. It was at this point in the interview that Cathy revealed a third theme, from best friend to total stranger. Cathy was shocked and horrified when her husband said he wanted a divorce. Cathy was completely blindsided and shattered. After all that she put up with, how could he do this to her? How could he ever leave her? They buried a child together, and he was her rock. Cathy was

devastated. The fact that Cathy had forgiven her husband after she knew about his affair and he still did this made her feel “hysterical.” She repeatedly expressed her devastation by asking him how he could do this to her after she took him back and forgave him.

In time, Cathy stated that she recognized a negative pattern she had been in with her husband for a long time. She observed, “I realized he was treating me just like he did everything else in his life. This is so hard to see when you are in it.” While living it Cathy was clear that she believed she was a loyal partner standing by him.

Cathy reflected on her own parents’ divorce, an incredibly painful event for her as she described it, when she was twenty-seven years old. She identified that this specific pain of divorce is everything she worked hard to avoid happening in her own life and marriage.

Cathy attempted to conjure up the strength she gained earlier from the loss and death of her child. She was devastated that her marriage was ending in divorce. Cathy’s loyalty to her spouse and her assumptive life with him were shattered. Sharing many seasons of life with her husband made it very hard for her to let go. Using her prior experience of death as her guide, Cathy sought to see divorce as a “new season.” She believed that she was in the process of learning from her mistakes and trying to move forward. In a bittersweet way, Cathy felt that letting her husband go “lifted the noose around my neck.”

Cathy, like all of the participants, was child-centered. Although a big piece of her felt as if she were dying, she also felt a strong need to live. She expressed concern for her children who see her cry. She noted that the children seem confused. Her youngest child, a six-year-old son, definitely seemed to be taking the divorce harder. Cathy felt proud of herself for beginning to provide a changed lifestyle for herself and her children. She paid particular attention to do some fun activities with them each week. Cathy observed this is something the family had not done in

a long time. A fifth theme, deconstruction of a painful past and reconstruction of the present, was under way

Even as Cathy talked about moving on from her husband and starting her new life, she continued to focus on him. Commenting on the fact that there was never one argument between them, she repeatedly struggled to truly make sense of what happened. It was through this difficulty that the theme of simultaneously dying – while living was also apparent. The very reasons that Cathy held on so tightly to her husband through the years were making it nearly impossible for her to let go now. Cathy agonized as she talked about seeing his problems while he does not. Before she could ever let him go completely, Cathy stated that she knew that she had to sit him down to tell him what she saw that she believed he was unable to see. She feared that she would be visiting him dead in a funeral home. And she took full responsibility for having to tell him how completely immersed he is in substance abuse. She stated, “Now that I had to really let go, and deal with his rejection of me, now I have to let go and deal with the idea that I can’t help him.” She continued that “doing the right thing” by telling him what she saw would make her feel better. It was her final gift to a man she still loved so much, whom she believed would destroy himself through addictions.

#### *Researcher's Experience*

I felt concerned for Cathy. As she told her story, I noted that she appeared less emotionally integrated while describing the chaos in the marriage she lived versus strength she seemed to feel as she talked about moving forward with her children. It was difficult for her to let go of her husband, and I suspected it became more difficult the more she saw with hindsight. Cathy brought to mind the book “*The Betrayal Bond*” (Carnes, 1997) with a theme of how people are tightly bonded through trauma. And I lamented the ravages of addictions! I found

myself thinking about the death of her daughter and how entangled that loss was with this man she loved so much. True to the process of *epoche*, I bracketed these thoughts and questions not to any way guide the interview. I noted the clinical wisdom of not taking something away until something is put into its place. For Cathy, it might mean building a solid new relationship with her children before she could go back and fully understand what happened in her marriage and her role in it. I understood that deconstruction and reconstruction would likely be going on for Cathy for a long time. Part of that would also include Cathy sifting through painful aspects of her parent's divorce that she never dealt with. But I saw in her a determination to continue making meaning for what happened. There was no doubt in my mind that Cathy was drawing on her past loss of her daughter to help her through this current loss.

### *Diane*

#### *Demographic Data*

Diane had been married to her husband for thirty years. The couple had five children ranging in ages from twenty-six to fifteen. Diane had a Bachelor of Science Degree. She was of European American descent.

#### *Case Study*

Diane learned about this research study from her parish priest. She was eager to contribute to the research, hoping that her experiences might help others.

From the very start, Diane exhibited a strong sense of outrage at having been manipulated by her husband. She expressed "shock" at their "tragic ending." Diane had a strong sense that she had been "duped." She was upset that she did not recognize his unfaithfulness earlier than she did. Similar to Brad, she questioned herself and had self-doubts that perhaps, in her high-functioning ability to run the home so effectively with his long hours of travel, she enabled him

in some way to deceive her. Diane explained that she carried a lot of the household tasks because she loved her husband and she believed he was proud of her. Diane's belief that they were married for the long haul revealed the first theme, believing we were married forever.

Diane was particularly devastated by his unfaithfulness to her. She explained that many years ago her spouse had an affair, and she had forgiven him. The couple ultimately went on to have two more children. Upon discovering this latest affair, Diane firmly intended to get to the bottom of it. There was no forgiveness or going back this time. Diane revealed that her husband essentially blamed her for this affair. He did so by blaming her for not accompanying him on a business trip. She stated,

When this woman came on to him, you know, he had no choice but to meet his needs. At first it was going to be a one night stand. They agreed not to have contact with each other. But after a few days she called him to say that the sex was just so wonderful, she had to have more of it. So they agreed they would see each other a few times a year.

Then Diane discovered evidence of a full-blown affair. She believed it was his intention to continue cheating on her. It was the discovery of a prescription for Cialis on the couple's computer that led her to confront her husband. And shortly after that, in a counseling session when he failed to bring up the confrontation Diane made to him about the Cialis, he revealed that he had been having an affair for five months. He told her he loved this other woman and wanted a divorce.

Diane felt traumatized as she grappled that not only was her marriage over, but her knowledge of her husband as she knew him was shattered as well. Diane explained that she knew her husband since her late teen years. He was an upright, moral, military school graduate who concerned himself with ethical living. It was this view of him that allowed her to put his

first affair behind her, believing it was a once in a lifetime event. Then, upon recognizing his duplicity as a person, Diane felt sick.

Her assumptive world shattered, Diane revealed that her husband had stopped having sex with her about a month before her online discovery of the prescription for Cialis. When she approached him, he turned her down. She stated that is what made her red flags go up immediately. And after his admission in counseling that he was seeing another woman, Diane found numerous love letters that he had sent to this other woman online.

Diane acknowledged that there was a "sexual gap" between her and her husband. She "believed that no one would be able to keep up with him sexually." That is why her red flags went up when he turned her down sexually. Then, when she found letters to this other woman, Diane was devastated to read his words "I could never go back to my unfulfilling wife." These discoveries Diane made revealed a second theme of believing the best but discovering the worst. Diane was devastated as she agonized and recognized the betrayal and deceit that she unknowingly lived through with her husband. With all of her good intentions in forgiving her husband's unfaithfulness a first time, now discovering infidelity again, a third theme of moving from best friend to total stranger revealed itself as well.

Diane lamented that the time period after the couple moved through the first affair was so painful for both of them that she never dreamed he would do it again. And Diane made very clear she never dreamed he would do this to the children.

Diane divulged her knowledge of his parent's divorce. She recalled that his father went to another country and sought divorce from his mother on the couple's wedding anniversary. She recalled that her husband never had a good relationship with his father. Diane observed that his father had personality issues, similar to the way Diane observed her husband having now.



Diane tried to make sense of what happened to her as the interview progressed. A sense of trauma and shattered beliefs about her husband and her life with him permeated the room. Diane talked about finding old love letters and cards that she and her husband shared between them over the years, now long stowed away in her nightstand drawer. Intense emotional sentiments were written in those memorialized lines which now provided sole evidence for what once existed between them. He frequently told her over the years that she was the best – which did not jibe with him telling her now that he had been unhappy for years. Diane was confused. In her own way of constant deconstructing while reconstructing, she was sorting through the pieces of “before” and “after.” Diane was sifting through pieces of her marriage trying to mentally and emotionally rearrange the most intimate fixtures of her mind and heart. Diane was on constant guard hearing her *self* versus the outdated messages he once told her. She stated that at times, when her mind saw him the old way, it was like being “hit in the head by a two by four” – hurriedly revamping the old images she had of him. Diane had to work hard to un-do and re-work the context and conceptualization of the man she thought she knew. She lost forty pounds through the divorce process. With the help of a good therapist, Diane was learning that many endearing behaviors that originally captured her heart with him were likely acts of self-gratification to make himself look good. She believed now they were not done for her.

Three of Diane’s older children lived out of the home. It was hard for her to recognize that there was friction between her older children living outside of the home and those still living in the home. Diane explained that the younger two children were very angry at their father while the older three were in constant contact with him. Diane observed, “The fact that my children would have to worry about such a thing has absolutely broken my heart.” In fact, one of Diane’s older daughters was protective of her father and picking fights with Diane. This upset Diane.

She stated "I didn't cause this mess yet I was being the one she was picking the fights with. Now I understand I'm the safe parent, and she will nurture the fragile parent." Also, another one of Diane's children refused to walk at her college graduation because "she does not want this awkward family scene."

Diane stated that, although the older children maintained contact with him, they all told her they lost respect for their father. All of the children used the word "inexcusable" to describe his behavior, and they all called him "hypocrite" and "sick". She elaborated,

None of the five of them wanted me to reconcile with him, even though that is what I desperately wanted initially. They know now that he had three affairs. Even this daughter said "Mom, one time is a mistake. Three times is a character flaw." My son who is in the military has been very supportive, but I hesitate to call on him at all for this. He needs to worry about saving his life and his buddies' lives. He will be deploying shortly. He modeled himself after his father, including following his father's footsteps into the military. And now, I hear from his girlfriend that he is sorry that he patterned his life after this person who is not who he thought he was.

Diane was filled with a sense of duplicity and betrayal as she struggled seeing much more to the man she previously revered. She mourned and grieved a relationship she once believed was built upon solid love and commitment, only now to learn after many years of marriage that the foundation had been built upon landmines and faults. Diane's ambiguous loss and shattered assumptions were palpable. For instance, Diane recalled that, after she gave birth to her babies, "He got me from the hospital but then went back to work. He dropped me off and left me with three, four, five kids!" Believing in him and their marriage, Diane was intentional in not complaining because she wanted to be a supportive, understanding wife. Now, as the foundation

of her relationship crumpled, feelings of incredulity took over. Diane felt betrayed, intensely and intentionally cheated. She felt “victimized” knowing that he watched her be this intentionally good wife while he was involved in another whole life she never knew about.

Diane understood reasons why there was such a big difference in her children’s reactions now. “The older three really weren’t seeing me in the dregs of this. They weren’t seeing their siblings in the dregs of this. It didn’t really affect them the way it affected the younger two.” The more Diane deconstructed and reconstructed her story, the clearer her sense of meaning-making became. The more she did that, the better and stronger she seemed to feel. It became apparent that the narrative process was helpful and healing for her. Through the narrative, Diane seemed to understand more clearly the enormity of what she was going through. And the clearer her vision of what she was accomplishing became, the stronger Diane seemed to feel about herself.

Diane was a child-centered parent who offered all of her children counseling. She carefully told the younger two what she would be looking for in their behavior to know if it was time to head to counseling. This included failing grades, eating problems, and other warning signs. Her husband was still texting the younger children who did not respond to him. And Diane expressed loving gratitude for the love and support of her parents. Of them she reflected, “My parents have helped me move through this. They are very healthy. I think this is why God has left them on the Earth this long. He knew their daughter would need something.”

#### *Researcher’s Experience*

Diane was a bright, articulate professional. Her sense of her marriage ending “tragically” and “shockingly” permeated all of her. I could not even image what Diane must have been experiencing on a number of fronts. These included what it must have been like for her to

recognize how betrayed she was by someone she loved who betrayed her once before, how insulted she sounded that her believing heart would have been misused in that way, and how humiliating this might have been for her with adult children. What I was most struck by was the fact that Diane seemed to be in a relationship with a sex addict, which she never mentioned through the interview. I was sure not to introduce my thoughts on that in any way. I could not even imagine how awful she must have felt once she recognized that sexual outreaches toward her that she interpreted as desire were likely more motivated by addiction. As I listened to Diane say that she needs to return to work after many years of not having done so, I was aware of how sorry I felt for her. When she talked about wanting to stay home and knit, I related to that! Diane's courage fully revealed the theme, simultaneously dying – while living. So much of her was dying and in great pain as she grappled with new information she learned, while simultaneously her children and her innate spirit kept pulling her toward life. I felt empathy for her as she spoke about being picked up from the hospital after giving birth to her children, only to be dropped off at home and left again. Diane seemed like a really good person who was very poorly treated. Her heart was in the right place to be a good wife to her husband, and I was sorry that she ended up with the terrible loss that she did. I found myself thinking about women who are *givers* frequently ending up with *takers*. I appreciated that she seemed aware that she was married to a narcissist. I deeply respected Diane for the good mother she seemed to be to children who got dragged through this ugly event.

About two weeks after the interview Diane called me. Her own therapist was away. Something came up with one of her kids and she wanted to consult. I kindly explained the boundaries of the research project and my inability to interface with her on other issues. I

guided her to see who was covering for her therapist and offered names of others. She immediately understood.

### *Emma*

#### *Demographic Data*

Emma had been married for sixteen years. She had four children ages three, eight, eleven, and thirteen. Emma had a Master of Arts Degree. She was of European American descent.

#### *Case Study*

Emma was referred to this research study by members of a divorce support group she was involved in at her church. She was sensitive and articulate. She started the interview by saying that she was not expecting the ending of her marriage at this time. As her story unfolded, it was evident that the couple had previously had rocky times. In fact, Emma wanted to leave. She was quite clear that she was tired of feeling mistreated. But her husband appeared to make a turnaround, saying all the things Emma needed to hear in order to change her mind. Therefore, she stayed and made a new start with him. This new start involved plans for a major move south and the construction of a brand new home that would house their new relationship. It was evident that Emma believed in her spouse completely. Her trust in him was enhanced by him constantly telling her how much he loved her and what a wonderful mother she was. As Emma revealed this information, the first theme, believing I was married forever, was revealed.

Emma explained that her husband had had an affair in their earlier relationship. She stated it was three years prior when she discovered the affair and subsequently forgave him, deciding to move forward with him. More recently, when Emma again began having intuitive feelings that something may be going wrong again, she began investigating. It was then that she

learned her hunches were right. In following her hunches, Emma revealed the second theme believing the best, but discovering the worst. Emma was devastated.

Emma was a spiritual person. Part of what totally blindsided her was the integrity she believed they shared as a couple, which led them to rededicate their family to God. Emma was traumatized by the fact that, on one hand, what her husband did now made no sense. On the other, it did make sense. Emma's trauma centered on the fact that she lived on the side of trusting him. She was also devastated upon learning that her husband's integrity was vastly different from what she thought and from what he led her to think. A strong sense of ambiguous loss and shattered assumptions permeated Emma's experience as she recounted it. Worse, at a moment when Emma felt so weakened, she, similar to Amy, Brad, and Diane questioned her role in allowing herself to be blindsided. She expressed this by acknowledging feelings of distrust in her own judgment of situations and of new people going forward.

Emma explained that she and her husband had previously been in counseling for abuse issues, mental and verbal abuse. It was during the period of time the couple attended counseling that she also realized she was pregnant with their fourth child. The couple had actually been discussing divorce at that time. Then, her husband told her how much he loved her and repeatedly assured her that she was the only woman he wanted to be with. Subsequently, as Emma discovered his duplicity, a theme of moving from best friend to total stranger emerged. Emma expressed her concerns to him when she first felt he may be slipping back into old ways. However, with many mixed messages and mind games, her husband convinced her it was all in her mind and that he loved her without reserve. She was the only woman he wanted to be with.

Emma, like Amy, Brad, and Diane whose marital endings also involved additional losses stemming from duplicity and betrayal, felt ravaged by trying to make sense of what happened.

She worked just as hard trying to figure out how she did not know her husband was this duplicitous person. Emma decided her husband lived out of many boxes. And she described how the person in each box was able to co-exist with the person in the other boxes, there never being a unified whole. Emma worked feverishly at deconstructing and reconstructing meaning. Without new meanings she was making through this process, nothing made sense. Emma could not move forward without some understanding of meaning and sense of the events that ended her marriage. Worse, these events led her to a sickening realization that she did not know her spouse.

Emma believed that he loved her in one of those boxes and that he stayed with her because she was the mother of his children. She believed staying with her made it easier for him in that he would not have to be concerned with child care for the children. On some level she believed he loved her, but not enough to regard her the way a spouse should be regarded.

Emma saw their family as a special gift. She could not understand how he could do this to them. The helplessness Emma felt while processing her many shattered assumptions was palpable. Emma's feelings of helplessness were rooted in an inability she felt to comprehend how someone could be two people. Her struggle centered on feeling powerless to understand on one hand how she trusted him, while simultaneously understanding that not to have trusted him after he said all the right things would equally have made no sense. Emma agonized over these conflicted feelings. Emma was dealing not only with divorce, but with information that revealed her husband's duplicity. Emma also struggled immensely to help her four children understand sudden, unexpected events that spun their family around. She explained how she tried her best to manage their household which had now become "chaotic." As one example, she said the children were brokenhearted that they were not moving south into their new home. The family

home was on the market to be sold, and Emma made the discovery of her husband's infidelity shortly before the move. Many of their possessions were in storage for months as they anticipated their move to the South. This included their kitchen table in storage, replaced by a tiny table they could barely all fit around. As Emma tried to make sense of her pile-up of losses, the fourth theme was revealed, simultaneously dying – while living. In one heartbeat Emma sorted through the endings of her life destroyed through betrayal while simultaneously planting herself firmly into a life she hoped would help her heal and move her children forward. Emma worked hard at bridging her “before” and “after” experiences.

Emma relived events that occurred on the night the couple's relationship blew up. In the last conversation Emma had had with her husband she confronted him about whether he was involved with anyone else. Emma stated that he wholeheartedly denied it, telling her repeatedly that she was the one he wanted to be with. That night he did not come home. Emma was worried sick, texting and calling him to no avail. He was travelling to another country for a business trip the next day, and Emma had made delicacies and treats to surprise him. There was a bottle of champagne waiting. Emma's oldest daughter was up and aware that her father had not come home. Emma was going to leave this oldest child with the younger ones to go to the train station to see if she could see his car, but she did not have enough gas in the car, and it was late. When she turned around and went back into the house, her husband called her. He said he was on his way home, he had been drinking, and he was in no mood to talk to her when he got home. He told Emma he was aware that she had been looking on his computer. He wanted nothing to do with her. And with that event, he ended the marriage.

Emma was left with four struggling children. “They were so excited about the new rooms they would have” she explained, and the let-down for all of them was intense. Emma



detailed the children's pain; the youngest one crying and saving treats for daddy, with the oldest one blaming herself for pre-adolescent antics that she believed pushed him away. In between was an eleven-year-old son who opened a window and ran away into the night, scarring Emma and instantly forcing her into a position of responsibility. And while trying to comfort these three children, there was an eight-year-old holding it all in, angry, but refusing to talk to anyone. As Emma used the grieving of her endings to make sense and meaning of what happened, she was constantly engaged in a process of deconstructing and reconstructing. The narrative of telling her story seemed to be helpful for her. Emma had previously talked about the support she received from family and friends while also valuing a support group at church where she sorted out what happened. Meaning-making, the fifth theme, was visible through the process Emma described throughout the interview. Putting herself second to four children she loved helped her. Any kindness Emma received from others, she seemed to channel into kindness toward her children. She had the uncanny good sense to recognize that, while all their worlds were torn apart, the children were also moving through the only childhoods they would ever have. Emma made conscious attempts to hug and hold them, to tell each one what was special about them. Emma talked about having to reinvent her life and needing to see herself differently. She said she was going to have to find her voice. Emma began the interview talking about the new life she believed she was starting with her husband. She ended it by talking about a new chapter in her life without him.

#### *Researcher's Experience*

I felt badly for Emma. Having four children, I could only imagine the antics in her house as she described scenarios among them. I heard a lot of confusion in Emma. And, although I did not, I wanted to cheer her on. I sensed that with her strong faith, Emma would come through this

experience better, not worse. I was keenly aware of Emma's brokenness throughout the interview. I actually became concerned about her when, through her trauma, she could barely form her words trying to express what it was like to live through a seemingly psychotic experience, that is, with her husband in so many boxes, she really did not know him. I lamented for the way he played with her mind, knowing that the words he spoke were the ones she loved to hear. I could see the wind taken right out from her sails as she talked about feeling weak and unable to trust people's words going forward. I found it humbling that, with those feelings, Emma would allow herself to be part of this interview with me, a complete stranger to her.

I was impressed and grateful that she was still able to be a good parent to her innocent children. Emma did not strike me as being particularly assertive or firm, so I believed she would need help finding a firm voice with her children as she needed that.

I knew that she was grieving through the interview, but I also knew she was walking a fine line through it. I wanted to be more consoling or comforting to her, but I also felt a need to bracket that inclination so as not to lead the interview in any way. As she embarked down one path, she just as quickly diverted on to the other path which painted a picture for me of her having lived two distinctly separate lives. I was amazed at her ability to center herself in places where she felt most broken. And I was proud to offer her this experience which I knew she found helpful. I was struck by the level of her faith. I really felt for her with the keen disappointment her children were feeling at not moving. I felt disappointment for her that she would not be travelling abroad the way her husband promised her, but, somehow, with the person he demonstrated himself to be to her, I knew she was better off without him. I had a strong sense that God would protect Emma.

*Frank**Demographic Data*

Frank had been married for twenty-two years. He had three children ages ten, thirteen, and seventeen. Frank had a Master's in Business Administration Degree. He was of European American descent.

*Case Study*

Frank was referred to this research study by the leader of the same support group that Emma participated in. As Frank revealed specific information about the ending of his marriage, he noted that neither he nor his wife were young when they got married, each one being in their thirty's. Frank stated that each of them had personal baggage going into the relationship and that each of them had been in individual and couple's counseling prior to the marriage.

Frank described a business relationship with another woman that could easily have turned into an affair. He recognized that this was a serious wake-up call in the marriage for him. He completely ended the other relationship and made an intentional decision to work on his marriage. He loved his wife. And, although he recognized they had drifted apart, it was his decision to stop the drifting between them and to create new vibrancy in their marital relationship. Frank honestly believed his wife would want this. It was in this belief that the first theme emerged for Frank, believing he was married forever.

Frank, who described himself as never having been an avid church-goer, felt imbued with strong feelings of spirituality. He began reading the Bible and eventually he returned to church. Frank longed to have a close and loving relationship with his wife, and he saw increased spirituality as a path toward it. He told his wife one day that his motivation for becoming more

spiritual was a longing he had to put his arms around her one day, telling her how much he loved her.

On Valentine's Day Frank bought gifts for his two daughters and his wife. His girls were delighted while his wife was lackluster. He approached her, asking what was wrong and, more importantly, what were her intentions for the marriage? He told her that everything he was doing to improve himself by becoming more spiritual was intended to enhance the closeness in the marriage. It was then that Frank's wife told him that she did not want to be married any longer. She wanted a divorce. Frank was stunned and heartbroken that his wife informed him that she wanted a divorce as he was taking the very steps he believed would make their marriage stronger. She stated that she was atheist. In addition to not wanting to be part of any spiritual life with him, she also did not share a world view with him any longer. Frank's wife stated emphatically that it was her turn in life to do what she wanted. At this juncture, a second theme emerged for Frank, believing the best but discovering the worst.

Frank stated that he went through a terrible depression. He stated, "I was just starting to fall apart." He felt very alone in the world. Frank was grateful that he had become involved in a church group prior to the divorce event, so that the support of others had already been established. He also lost a job around that time, a loss that he said was not divorce-related, but which devastated him. Frank secured another job, but felt a strong sense of responsibility not to show any traces of the effects of divorce on the job.

Frank's wife was eager to tell the children about the divorce. Frank was clear that he would not be with her when she told them. Frank was further stunned when his wife announced that she would tell each of the children individually. And she would take them out of the house to do so. She then proceeded to take their oldest, a seventeen-year-old daughter, out to dinner.

In that setting his wife told her that she was divorcing Frank. Frank was waiting at home. Upon making eye contact with his daughter, he knew the devastation she was feeling. Frank went to her room being as consoling as he could. Then his wife took their thirteen-year-old, middle son out to tell him, and he was equally as upset. Frank was there for him too. When the time came for their youngest daughter to be told, his wife decided to tell her in their basement. Frank cried as he recalled screams that came from the basement as his ten-year-old little girl was told. It was at this point in the interview that Frank revealed the third theme, from best friend to total stranger. Frank could not comprehend the stranger his wife had become both to him and to their innocent children. He was filled with ambiguous loss as he grappled with this person he no longer knew. Frank was a child-centered dad who knew and loved each of his children dearly.

Then, as Frank's seventeen-year-old daughter began looking at colleges, another major stressor immobilized him. Frank was aware that he was sensitive to abandonment issues, but as his daughter looked at colleges several hours away, Frank could not cope. He described incidents, first with his sister and then with his mother, in which he was so anxious and overwhelmed that he could not even tell them it was he on the phone. Eventually in meeting with his mother, with his sister accompanying him, Frank resolved a long-repressed memory. For the first time he understood the power that abandonment issues played in his life. Frank detailed memories he had of having been hospitalized as a young child, three or four years old. His mother was forced to leave him at the hospital since parents did not remain with their hospitalized young children all those years ago. Frank was hospitalized for tonsillitis and was in a lot of pain. He vividly recalled the stainless steel cribs used in children's wards back in those days. He was terrified and felt abandoned by his mother. Frank relived detailed memories of hysterically crying. He could not find his mother! He did not stop. A nurse took him over to the

window and showed him how far down it was to the ground floor. Frank described that he was up on the second or third floor of the hospital. The nurse then proceeded to tell him that if he did not stop crying, she would lower him outside of the window. And if he still did not stop, she would let him go! As Frank relived this memory, the stress and anxiety he felt was palpable in the room. And, although it helped him identify why the abandonment of his wife through the divorce was hitting him so hard now, it did nothing to help him feel less devastated. Frank continued to convey intense emotions about feeling alone. And it was clear that as Frank worked hard to be present to his children and all their pain, putting one foot in front of the other as a big piece of him died, yet another piece of him lived, Frank revealed the fourth theme, simultaneously dying – while living.

During the course of their divorce, Frank recognized that his wife was alcoholic. He recalled many years earlier when a friend he shared a room with in college, who was also in recovery for alcoholism, told Frank his belief that Frank's wife was alcoholic. Frank was unable to see this at the time, asserting that his wife did not drink much more than he did. And Frank surely did not see himself as an alcoholic. However, the friend pointed out the secretive way that Frank's wife drank as well as tendencies toward binge drinking. Now, as his divorce progressed, Frank saw it all. The increase in alcohol consumption alarmed him. And the more he addressed this issue with her, the more she drank.

Frank worked hard at deconstructing and reconstructing meaning as he worked through his multiple losses. His little girl in particular struggled through the divorce. This youngest child, 10, believed they would no longer be a family. Frank tried hard to show her they would still be a family. He described his wife as not being very child-centered. She also had expressed strong feelings that this was her time in life to go live freely apart from family responsibilities.

As the divorce progressed, Frank became attuned to signs that his wife was increasingly decompensating. He was concerned, but also unable to be in two places at one time.

Frank talked about painful divorce proceedings. He had every intention to spend as much parenting time with his children as possible. His wife made him feel guilty for this, making accusations that the active role he sought for himself meant he saw her as an unfit mother. Then one day his wife sent him a text message that Frank perceived to be suicidal. He attempted to make outreach to her which did not work. When that did not work, he reached out to her therapist. Ultimately he contacted the police who went to the home and found her to be fine. Frank, through a process of deconstructing and reconstructing, made meaning and sense of all of these events. He recognized the pivotal person he was in his children's lives. Especially in light of what he considered increased undependability in his wife, he had some limited vision of what the future might hold. He became an intentional parent more than ever before. His spirituality was his rock. With the ravages of unresolved abandonment issues behind him, Frank tried to be strong. He tried to stay open to new people. He was grateful he never had the affair that he came so close to having. And as Frank expressed gratitude for the narrative opportunity to tell his story, there was a sense that he would go forward broken and bruised, but not beaten.

#### *Researcher's Experience*

I was immediately grateful that Frank took the time to meet for this interview since there was so much turmoil going on all around him. The interview happened to be the very same day that his wife sent him the suicidal text message. Frank looked and sounded drained by that. He also was off to meet with his own therapist after the interview at the late hour of 9:30 p.m. Although I had feelings that I took Frank out of his way to participate in this interview, I also felt gratified to recognize that it helped him. I found myself amazed by all that he had been through,

not the least of which was articulating the story of his repressed memory. I could not even imagine what was coming next as I held my pen taking notes through the story! I envisioned this little person being shown from the window how far down two or three floors were and being threatened to be dropped! My heart pounded just hearing the story; I could not even imagine being a child in that story! But, his divorce being the precipitating event that brought this repressed memory forward, it reminded me that God makes no mistakes. I knew that Frank, as all the participants, would end up in better places for their experiences. I trusted that. And, although it was hard to see him hurt and to have lost so much, I believed that the gains in the long-run would be greater than the losses.

Participating in the interview seemed meaningful to Frank. I was happy to have created an opportunity for his narrative to be told. I sensed that it helped him. I considered that he might have heard about the process from Emma and actually wanted to be there, perhaps in a meaningful way to help himself. It appeared that Frank was in touch with what was meaningful to him now more than ever. I could hear this through his comments of relief that he never succumbed to having an affair and that Frank relished the increased integrity he was finding in his life through the divorce.

I admired Frank for his ability to deal with the multiple losses in his life, alongside of his intentional decisions to make the most that he could of them. I understood how valuable the interview process was for him, without me saying much at all. I became in touch with my own value for listening more than speaking. Without input on my part, other than having provided the research questions as a guide, Frank benefited. I benefitted as well from being part of a process that helped him so much. I felt grateful for him to be the father to his children that he was. In divorce situations in which many men and their children lose significant portions of their



lives together through loss of everyday parenting, I became grateful for Frank to have a greater part of what his wife no longer wanted -- parenting three innocent children. And although things would never be the same for any of them, I had the distinct feeling that Frank and his children would work hard to deconstruct and reconstruct. They would reconstruct new family meanings. And they would evolve into just what Frank reassured his youngest daughter they would become -- a family with a father and a mother who were no longer married.

### *Grace*

#### *Demographic Data*

Grace had been married to her husband for eighteen years. She had two children living at home, ages sixteen and eighteen. Grace had a Bachelor of Arts Degree. She was of European American descent.

#### *Case Study*

Grace was involved in the same support group for people experiencing divorce that Emma and Frank were involved in. She wanted very much to contribute to this research study.

From the outset, Grace stated that she was shocked her marriage ended. She also acknowledged feelings of fear of making it on her own. From the start, Grace spoke about their strong family unit. She emphasized that she was a stay-home mom because she and her husband wanted to be a traditional family. Grace's depiction of the marriage that ended way too suddenly for her led to the first theme, believing we were married forever. Grace indicated that her husband told her each morning that he loved her as he left for work. Since he seemed loving and happy, Grace felt shocked and betrayed as her marriage ended.

Grace, similar to Amy, Brad, Diane, and Emma, initially questioned if she was to blame. She wracked her brain to figure out what part, if any, she played in the stunning information she

learned about her marriage and her spouse at the end. Grace felt filled with inadequacies and insecurity. These insecurities were inflated by her husband playing mind games with her, allowing her to think she was the problem. Nowhere along the line, Grace stated, did her husband ever indicate to her that there was a problem.

Grace, similar to Cathy, accommodated her husband's wishes in the relationship more than her own. This was part of the traditional family structure that both of them wanted. Grace described how her world was absolutely shattered when she learned that something was very wrong. Grace revealed the second theme of believing the best while discovering the worst. Grace felt deeply shamed when she realized that her husband had been unfaithful to her, not just once, but, she believed, multiple times.

Grace, like all of the other participants, was a child-centered parent. As she reflected on her reactions to learning that her husband had been unfaithful, she also elaborated on how these changes in her spilled into her relationship with her children. As ambiguous loss permeated her traditional family life, Grace wished she could have managed herself and her reactions better in the early days of the divorce. Grace expressed disappointment in herself that her children observed her reactions in the early divorce when she felt out of control upon her discoveries.

Grace recognized her history of accommodating her husband. When she stopped being codependent and confronted the issues, she stated that "things blew up." It was at that point that their relationship made yet another turn into a third theme, from best friend to a total stranger. Grace no longer knew the man who told her he loved her each morning as he left for work. She was devastated, shocked, and filled with a sense of betrayal. From a traditional stay-at-home mom to finding out about her husband's infidelity, Grace was filled with fear.

Grace felt strongly that her husband's infidelity were "soul issues on her heart." The fact that the affairs were continuous left her unable to heal. She equated the deep wounds she felt to "cancer on her soul." As Grace described her strong feelings of betrayal to her soul, her grief and sense of mourning for the man she thought she was married to were palpable. Grace never envisioned the outcome she would face as a result of confronting certain issues.

Grace also never envisioned that her oldest child would want to move out and live with his father. This hurt Grace deeply in the beginning. As Grace struggled to comprehend many changes in her traditional family, she revealed a fourth theme, simultaneously dying – while living.

In many ways Grace felt motivated to help herself move through the worst of her betrayal and loss for the sakes of her children. Grace continued to be involved with her family, and she supported her children being involved with her husband's family. Grace tried to maintain family gatherings and events as best she could. When there were gatherings, her son played the guitar and sang, just the way he had done previously. As Grace moved into the fifth theme, deconstruction and reconstruction, she worked hard to be strong.

Grace focused at the end of the interview on one significant insight that she took away from her sudden, unexpected divorce. Now that she was on her own, Grace stated that her sole focus was to become the person that God had created her to be. Noting that she had been "literally dying," Grace recognized that what she did with the divorce was about her. She could not control her spouse ending the marriage, but she could control her attitude about the divorce going forward. Grace felt lost and scared, but she did not want bad feelings to be part of the rest of her life. In her meaning reconstruction, Grace recognized that she and her husband would

be together at future events in their children's lives. From her perspective, she wanted these events to be as pleasant as possible.

Grace cried as the interview came to an end. Softly sobbing, she said that she did not know if other participants had figured this out yet, but the reason the sudden, unexpected divorce hurt so much is because of how much she loved her husband. The ending of her marriage was never how she intended it to be, she observed. Once having stated that, Grace appeared a little stronger. She pulled herself forward in her seat. As if from within one heartbeat, she saw two distinctly separate sides of what she had been experiencing as one whole. On one side she was dying because the man she loved so much, who told her he loved her each morning as he left for work, left her. He ended their marriage. Grace had no control over that. On the other side, Grace was living. This was her side of that same single heartbeat the couple once shared that Grace wanted to live. Slowly, and through a process of deconstruction, reconstruction, and meaning-making, Grace saw that this was the only side that she had any control over. The pain was brutal for Grace as for all of the other participants. But something about Grace being the seventh participant interviewed brought light to another perspective. That is, all of the participants were simultaneously weakened and then strengthened by a grieving process. Grieving their losses through deconstruction, participants then seemed to resurface, strengthened, into a process of reconstruction. Within that process, they came to grips with the enormity of their pain but something about confronting it head-on, and coming out the other side changed them. Maybe there was some freeing up of energy that happened as each of them recognized the enormity of what they had done. Maybe on the side of reconstruction participants were for the first time beginning to look over their shoulders at what they had faced and lived through in the deconstruction phase. Maybe there was a sense that, if they could face that (betrayal imposed by

their best friends), they could face anything. Losing her best friend and recognizing she was living with a total stranger took a heavy toll on Grace. Pulling back from “literally dying” into living without cancer on her soul would somehow see Grace through. It was not what she wanted, but she would make the best of her half that was left.

### *Researcher's Experience*

I liked Grace. I found myself having empathy for the heartbreak she was experiencing. On one hand, she chose and very much wanted the traditional family structure they had. On another, making waves and standing up for herself were unprecedented in the life of their marriage. When she stopped being codependent, the marriage blew up and came to an end. Getting rid of “cancer on her soul” came with a high price tag for Grace – the ending of a (duplicitous) marriage.

I was impressed by Grace’s ability to embrace honesty and truth over a compromised marital relationship. I was so struck by her use of the analogy that living with duplicity felt like living with “cancer on her soul.” I also felt touched by the way Grace spoke from her heart. In fact, I reflected on the fact that all of the participants spoke from their hearts. I became so keenly aware that, with as low as their divorce experiences brought them, a part of each of them really did die. I felt humbled and exhilarated all at the same time to have captured the insights that were reported to me through this research. I knew that research is more of an interest for me than I ever recognized before. Creating a forum in which participants could put words to these experiences was a gift for them and for me. It reinforced for me the value of listening for the subjective meaning markers our clients bring to us.

Grace really wanted to contribute to a study that focused on sudden, unexpected endings. She said there was nothing in the literature that helped her when she first learned that her

marriage was over. Therefore, she wanted to contribute to the literature to contribute knowledge. I appreciated that.

### *Heather*

#### *Demographic Data*

Heather had been married to her husband for seventeen years. She had one child, age fourteen. Heather had her Master of Arts degree. She was of European American descent.

#### *Case Study*

Heather agreed to participate in this research project after hearing about it at her church. She stated that the couple's marriage from the outset was never completely smooth sailing. She knew that her husband was going through a mid-life crisis at times, but she believed in him as he got past many rough times. These included the crisis of his brother's death from cancer, as well as losing many of his friends on 9/11/2001. In this way, Heather revealed the first theme, believing that the couple was married forever. Heather, who was married for seventeen years, did not see the divorce coming.

Heather stated that, after their daughter was born, she (Heather) became significantly preoccupied with her. She was never an easy child. At around four years old, their daughter was diagnosed with a developmental disorder. Heather stated that she (Heather) was crushed with this diagnosis. However, her husband appeared more accepting of it and was definitely the stronger of the two of them.

Heather was blindsided when her husband separated from her. Believing in the strength of their marriage as she did, Heather revealed a second theme, believing the best, but discovering the worst. Heather was ravaged by low-self-esteem and insecurity after he left her. She, like other participants, went through a period of blaming herself for his leaving, questioning what she

did wrong. Heather stated that, even though he was telling her it was not her fault but something that he was going through, she continued to blame herself.

Heather reported that, after the couple had been married for about four years, her husband separated from her for a brief period. This was prior to the couple having their child. She resigned herself to the ending of their marriage then, and was willing to move forward with a divorce. However, after approximately four months of being away from her, Heather's husband was firm in his decision to want to come back. He wanted to make the marriage work. Heather stated, "And things were fine. And we had my daughter." However, it was after that period of time that Heather's brother-in-law died of cancer, and the tragedy of 9/11/2001 occurred, both of which events held significant pain and loss for her husband. Heather stated,

All of a sudden, things were not so good anymore because he just to me, he went off the deep end. Oh, and at about the same time he was reaching a milestone birthday. And he started to reevaluate things like what have I done, where am I, so that's when things turned not so good.

Slowly, Heather began recognizing changes in him that she did not see before. She stated that he began going out a lot and, to her shock, would come home without his wedding band on. Heather slowly revealed the presence of a third theme, from best friend to total stranger. Although Heather noted these changes, the couple did not discuss them. Heather's own parents having been married over fifty years and her husband telling her he wanted to be with her after the separation prompted Heather to ignore what she saw. Suddenly, however, her husband told her that he thought it was time that they divorce. This was a very difficult time for Heather with much loss of self-esteem and increased insecurity. She blamed herself for her husband wanting to end their marriage.

Heather had a special-needs child to care for. She stated that although her daughter is “high functioning,” her daughter did not talk. Revealing a fourth theme of simultaneously dying – while living, Heather, who had a very difficult time making sense of the ending, had to find a way to get through the divorce for the sake of her child. Although Heather explained to their eleven-year-old daughter that the couple would no longer be living together, Heather observed that little changed in the child’s routine interactions with her father. Heather stated that, as the child has gotten older, her relationship with her father is changing. As an example, sometimes when the child visits, his girlfriend is there. Heather’s daughter does not like this. She tries to communicate with her father as best as possible, but more recently Heather noted that he is unwilling to be guided by his daughter’s requests. In fact, sometimes the child goes to therapy to try to sort out her many feelings.

Heather stated that at the time her husband suddenly ended their marriage, she made absolutely no sense of his actions. However, over time and through an active process of deconstruction and reconstruction, Heather understood more. It was not easy for her to survive the major loss she experienced when he left. Heather expressed the strong feelings of embarrassment and humiliation that she felt at that time. However, with a strong faith life, she became more resigned. She recognized that she and her husband are very different people. And the person that Heather is evolving into seems to be one she likes more than before.

#### *Researcher’s Experience*

I sensed, as Heather related her experience of sudden, unexpected divorce, that this was a difficult divorce experience for her. I noted this as she spoke about feelings of self-blame and insecurity. I questioned if Heather still held feelings of insecurity as she spoke about it, based on a lack of eye contact she made with me at times. I felt sorry for Heather, whose voice cracked as



she revealed remnant particles of self-blame and insecurity. These seemed to surface particularly around her discussion of her daughter having a developmental disorder. I found myself grateful that I did not have a special-needs child. With as difficult as parenting can be, I wondered what that additional overlay of complications must be like. I found myself thinking this way as I heard Heather speak about the amount of time she spent while in the marriage focused on the special needs of her daughter. I found myself happy for Heather's teenaged daughter, who once did not speak, to have found her ability to speak up to her father for her needs in relationship with him. I was so happy to hear that she had a voice now!

Through a lot of hard work, Heather deconstructed, then reconstructed her life in ways that were cohesive for her. Whatever changed internally for her as a result of having been left in such a sudden way, Heather appeared to have taken that to make herself and her life better. This included the life of her daughter as well. Although she was distressed and experienced loss of self-esteem through the divorce, she appeared significantly less distraught than Amy, Brad, Cathy, Diane, and Emma. I attributed this to an absence of themes in her history that were related to the additional stressors of duplicity and betrayal. Heather was upset. And, although I could hear that at one time her assumptive world was shattered, I also recognized that this was no longer the case. Heather had just completed her Master's Degree, an attainment that was meaningful and meant a lot to her. I could not help but sense that part of meaning-making for Heather after the divorce centered upon completion of this degree which for her was a tribute to her faith as well as the beginnings of a new career.

### *Themes that Emerged*

As the participants related their experiences of sudden, unexpected divorce, four main themes became evident: (1) I thought we would be married forever, (2) from best friend to total stranger – like another whole side emerged I never knew was there, (3) a simultaneous process of dying – while living, and (4) meaning making – a constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction. All of these themes consisted of subthemes, each of which will be discussed further within the specific theme sections that follow.

#### *I Thought We Would be Married Forever*

As each participant described the experiencing of sudden, unexpected divorce, a theme emerged revealing a belief that marriages would last forever. This did not imply smooth sailing all the way for all of them, but it did imply that, no matter what they encountered along life's way, the couple would somehow get through it together. Participants drew on what they knew from the past as they continued to build a present and a future with their spouses.

However, in ways that shocked and stunned all of the participants, their relationships encountered downturns they never expected. It was clear that for all eight of participants the narrative experience of telling their stories of deconstruction and reconstruction was helpful. Slowly, they detailed forks in unfamiliar roads and relationships that changed on unfamiliar paths as they described all-too-generally-unfamiliar terrain.

Participants grappled with events they had encountered and, in some cases, new information they were still finding out. They struggled to understand or make sense of events they originally thought were “no big deal” that, now they realized, were in fact very big deals. Second guessing themselves they wondered if they had been oblivious to what was going on, believing as they did in their spouses and in their relationships. For many, waves of uneasiness

began washing over them as they clung tight to the reality they knew as a family while slowly and agonizingly recognizing other realities were also at play that they knew nothing about. Ambiguous loss characterized as “unclear goodbyes in everyday life” (Boss, 1999, p. 30) and “being kept in the dark” (Boss, 2006, p. 6) was palpable. Fearing that their patience and understanding may have allowed them to be manipulated and deceived greatly exacerbated their pains. As Brad stated with conviction at a moment when he sorely needed self-understanding, “You get married because you don’t want to have to deal with all of the nonsense of dating and winning somebody over. So you think you’re settled.”

Subthemes that emerged from this first theme were (a) you get married believing you are married for life and (b) wanting to believe the best, but discovering the worst.

*You get married believing you are married for life.* All of the participants expressed beliefs that they were married for life. Amy’s belief in her spouse helped frame their relationship history even before the couple got married. Amy, more than any other participant, detailed ways that she cautiously learned as much as she could about her future spouse while dating. For example, she found out from others who knew him that he was a “nice guy.” Amy, whose father died when she was a teen, felt an innate need for security which she found in this relationship. As the couple married and lived a life of shared family values for sixteen years, Amy believed their marriage was forever. Together the couple made their family their life as they were actively involved in community and sports events with their children. “People looked up to us and thought we were going to be a family that lived together forever. People used to say you are like the family I want.” Amy said that she “knew forever that his parents were divorced, but from day one he swore to me that he was never going to be like his dad.” Amy believed in her spouse and trusted him without reservation.

Diane believed in her spouse and in their marriage so strongly that, despite the fact that her spouse had an earlier affair a long time ago, the couple healed, moved on, and had two more children. She said, "I think anybody on the outside world would say our family was idyllic. We went to church; we did things on the weekends; we ate dinner together." Diane's statement, "I trusted him with my life after that" revealed her strong belief after thirty years that they would be married forever.

Brad, married the shortest time of all the participants, enjoyed nine years of marriage with a core value of "You get married believing you're married for life." When he later began having doubts about his wife's fidelity, he continued to believe in her and in their relationship, as she reassuringly calmed him by saying, "How could I ever cheat? What would my family think?"

Cathy summed up what she loved most about her husband, stating that he always lived in the present moment. Having lost a child together in their early marriage, Cathy's spouse was her rock of strength during that difficult time. She said, "In all my life of knowing him, he was not a person who had anxiety about life. He came from a humble background and was just a good guy." And, although there were problems along the way, Cathy never dreamed that he would leave her.

Emma believed in her spouse and in their marriage completely, especially because the couple was on the upswing, rebuilding their relationship after previously rocky times. Her husband constantly told her he loved her. And, loving him and their family as she did, Emma put the past behind her, agreeing to make a major move to another state where his job was located. It was while the couple was in the process of building a new home, not far into their "new start," that Emma discovered evidence that led their marriage to come to a grinding halt.

Frank, similar to Cathy and Emma, also had rocky times in his early marital relationship. Acknowledging that both he and his spouse had “baggage” coming into the marriage, Frank completely believed in the strength of their marital relationship. Based on his belief that they were married forever, Frank turned away from an extra-marital affair, got himself into counseling, and made a stronger-than-ever commitment to his spouse and to their relationship. To his shock and dismay, it was during this period of time that his wife announced that the marriage was over.

Similarly, Grace said that she completely trusted and believed in the man in her life who “told me each morning that he loved me before he left to go to work to support us.” The couple had chosen a “traditional lifestyle,” and Grace enjoyed being a “stay-at-home” mom. She had absolutely no reason to believe there was more going on in their lives behind the scenes that she knew nothing about. Grace was stunned. Her heart was broken, her trust shattered.

Heather acknowledged that, from the start, their marriage “was rocky and wasn’t always smooth sailing.” There was a several month’s separation in the early relationship after which “He came home and wanted to work things out.” Perceiving this reconciliation as evidence of his commitment to her and to their marriage, Heather believed they were married for the long term.

*Believing the best, but discovering the worst.* Each of the participants, after having first described long-term marriages that found them happy, revealed other events that subsequently became marker moments in their relationships. Amy, having enjoyed a particularly close relationship with her spouse as they were involved in many activities together, became immediately aware when she felt distance from him. She said, “You seem so distant to me, and I don’t understand what’s going on. He turned around and yelled at me and said you make me that way!” Since this was completely out of character for their usual interactions, Amy immediately

responded positively to her husband, validating his concerns while explaining her perspective. Wanting to make the situation better, she moved past the unpleasant exchange saying, "Thank you for talking to me. I appreciated that you opened up and told me that." Although Amy mentally noted this event, she thought little of it except to be a more cheerful partner.

As her husband left for job training the following week, Amy was mindful to send him an email saying, "Remember, I always love you." While gone, Amy's husband made few outreaches to her, also out of character for their relationship. Amy stated that she knew "there was a lot going on for him at work, so I attributed it to stressfulness." Amy was trying to be understanding of him at a time she knew he was under pressure. She stated that her spouse was "warm and affectionate with her upon his return, and he apologized for being so cranky that day when he came home." Things were good between them, and Amy had no reason to believe that their earlier interaction might be indicative of deeper problems. Then a third glitch occurred when the couple was at a carnival. Amy recalled that the couple was holding hands together when someone announced that another couple arrived. Amy noted, "He stopped holding my hand. I'll never forget it. And I never understood why. I couldn't understand what that was about."

Brad was stunned when his wife announced to him that she no longer felt "special." He explained that this comment came up "rather suddenly." Brad explained that his wife brought up a recurring argument between them about him not putting away the laundry and not doing enough around the house. Brad could not understand the context of that argument as the basis for his wife not feeling "special." What Brad focused on in his mind was the fact that he had gained weight over the years. Brad feared that his weight gain had negatively impacted his wife's feelings for him. He enjoyed his family life with his wife and young children, and he

cared very much to make his marriage work. From Brad's perspective, the marriage had gone over a bump, but the couple was definitely moving forward.

One day Brad intercepted a text message on his wife's phone. It read "Just tell him that you're done. You feel like you're going through the motions." When Brad confronted her, his wife minimized the event, reassuring Brad that things were good between them and that she would never cheat on him. Brad wanted to believe her and had no reason not to. Just to be sure, he even asked to look at her Yahoo account. Seeing nothing awry, Brad did not dwell on the text message he had seen.

About a month later, Brad's wife began going out many late nights. He reported one night in particular when the couple was scheduled to go out,

She said "Do you mind if I go out until 9:00, and I'll come back." At 9:30 I sent a text message where are you? At 10:30 where are you? At 11:00, the same. Finally, around midnight she responded "Oh, I have my phone in my girlfriend's pocketbook, so I didn't get the messages. Her boyfriend broke up with her so I'm here consoling her". Then she came home around 2:00 in the morning, and I was livid. I said "You need to be here with me, not her!" She said "I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you."

Shortly after that, Brad "started documenting all the times she was going out because I'd be home with the kids while she was going out." He was blindsided by events he ultimately learned that changed their relationship forever. Brad added,

She would make comments swearing on our children's lives that she was not cheating and saying "how could she ever do that to her family?" She played it like that, very manipulative in hindsight.

Diane's husband had had a previous affair earlier in their marriage. She stated that the couple had gone to counseling at that time. Attributing the earlier affair to extreme stress her husband was under professionally, and knowing that her husband suffered from a serious medical condition that was greatly exacerbated by the stress of his career, Diane "forgave him." The couple went on to have two more children together. She stated, "I cared for him to the point of exhaustion because I loved him and because that is what I was supposed to do as a wife." Diane was devastated when she recognized she had been betrayed again.

Cathy never expected that the worst would happen in her marriage. She knew that her husband used substances as a way to cope through life, but she "accommodated" him because she loved him. She stated:

Financial hardship is a hard thing. You just can't ignore it. Once that started hitting home for him, the job losses, selling the home, the pressure, it all started building on him, and he couldn't run anymore. His value system in life also changed. His outlook on is there a God, is there a good God, and what his priorities in life were changed significantly. When life wasn't falling into place for him, he just started bolting. I let my needs be completely ignored because I felt bad for him. And that is why I was so devastated when he ended the marriage.

Emma explained that during the summer before her marriage came to a grinding halt, she "needed some space." She stated,

It had been a rough time where I was tired of him mistreating me. But he didn't want that. He wanted to stay together, and so by summer's end I felt that maybe we should give it another try. And since he was working out of state, I felt that maybe our family should make a new start, move down to where he works. And since he's gone a lot, I just



thought that would possibly give us a fresh start, to move through. I told him I still love him and that I wanted to do this for us and for our children. And he agreed. And we decided to build a home, down in the South. I thought things were going well, although he was traveling almost every week and home on the weekends. So, when I began to have intuitions about something must be going on, I just had a need to investigate. What I found just did not make sense!

Frank explained the beginnings of change in his marriage in the following way. He stated:

I had my own challenges coming into the relationship, and she had her baggage. We weren't young, I was about 33 when I got married, and she was 31. I had reached a point in the marriage a number of years ago when I was troubled with the state of the relationship, and I had an opportunity to have an affair. I set myself to think about this, and somehow this became very serious. It became a much more awakening awareness to me that this wasn't just us, it wasn't just me and my wife, it was me and my kids, it was our families, and it just suddenly became wow! And I basically told the woman who approached me "No, I cannot do this. I want to commit myself to my marriage and my family." We both went to individual counseling; we went to couples counseling. I know that I said to her "This is important to me. I want to make our marriage work." And as I got more into the Bible and became more religious, I progressed to going back to church again. And, as I was doing that, it seems more and more that it wasn't working. She was resistant to me doing that.

Grace talked about first realizing there were serious problems in her relationship. She stated,

I felt that everything was fine. I felt that we were a strong family unit. He never came to me and said there was a problem. And then it all started with him lying and covering things up and blaming other people and trying to make me feel like I was crazy when I knew I wasn't. He said he didn't want to lose me or the family, but then I recognized it was the old cliché, he wanted his cake and he wanted to eat it too. I was shocked at how things just blew up when I confronted them.

Heather was rather stunned to recognize that her husband was not happy. She explained "At the time, I knew he was going through midlife crisis kind of thing, and I thought he'll get past it." We had had an earlier separation, but, when he came home, he said that he "really wanted to work it out. "

*From Best Friend to Total Stranger – Another Whole Side Emerged I Never Knew Was There.*

This theme moved beyond earlier recognition that something was wrong, toward much greater awareness of the seriousness of the problem. How their partners changed, and how the participants had unwittingly been deceived and manipulated by their partners through duplicity, mixed messages, and mind games became exceedingly clear. Recognizing that their caring and understanding in many cases allowed them to be manipulated and deceived greatly exacerbated their pains. This was especially true for Amy, Brad, Cathy, Diane, Emma, and Grace.

As a sense of ambiguity deepened and the awareness of the unknown intensified, Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace all assumed blame or shame stemming from the changes as if they somehow had a role in creating the changes. Amy's, Diane's, and Emma's husbands' outright blamed them for their own shortcomings as each of these wives got closer to issues their spouses never intended for them to find. And, although there was less ambiguity surrounding the ending of Heather's marriage, and, although her husband never blamed her, she too reported

feelings of shame and blame as her husband unexpectedly left her. This tendency toward self-blame, initially considered more palatable than facing the unknown that was all-too-frighteningly closing in, subsequently mirrored Janoff-Bulman's (1992) description of behaviors that victims engaged in upon facing "human-induced victimizations" (p. 78). Participants made sense and meaning of their "before" and "after" stories in detailed and descriptive ways. Awareness began creeping in that, although they had lived lives together that appeared happy, they also very much had lived separate lives, apart. Betrayal and duplicity emerged through their realizations that the marriages – that once coveted friendship between two people who seemingly were committed to each other for life – were over. The dance between couples, previously long-established and bound together by their intimate, couple identity, ended in very frightening ways for all of them. As Brad stated rather astutely, "I couldn't be prepared. I even said to her "Well, you are a lot further along in this process than I am." Sadly, participants recognized what they never dreamed before: It takes two people to make a marriage and only one to end it. And the meaning of Soren Kierkegaard's (1843) words was never clearer: "We live our lives forward, but we understand them backwards" (p. 146).

Subthemes that evolved from this second theme included (a) sudden, unexpected endings, (b) duplicity, mixed messages, and mind games, (c) shattered assumptions, (d) infidelity, (e) addictions, and (f) family-of-origin divorce issues.

*Sudden, unexpected endings.* None of the participants saw the endings of their marriages coming. Amy recalled that during that weekend in bed her husband hugged her, "but I didn't feel it was a hug of total – I knew he'd had a stressful week, and we hadn't done a lot of talking." About two hours later, Amy asked her husband about the email she had previously sent him reminding him that she always loves him.

He said "I've been meaning to talk to you about that." I said "What do you mean?" And he said "I've decided I don't love you anymore and I don't want to be married anymore."

Just like that.

Amy sobbed softly at this point in the interview. "What a shock! What a shock!" She repeated several times, her whole body shaking, rocking back and forth, her voice trailing off.

Shortly after that, Amy began looking at the history on the couple's phone account. It was then that she recognized that her husband had initiated contact with an old girlfriend the year before this event. Amy recalled

That Sunday night I said to him, "Are you sleeping with Erin?" He said "No, I am not." But in the records he had made contact with her right after our wedding anniversary, which we were so proud of. And it just seems like a blur after that. I got my divorce papers on my anniversary date. I got them UPS at my house, in front of my children. Then two days later he called and said, "I decided to pursue my relationship with Erin." I was devastated that he had decided to cut off everything.

Brad explained that on another weekend, when his wife was away with her family, he sent her a text message saying,

We need to go to marriage counseling. This is enough already, you're supposed to be in love with me. She was giving me lots of signals to keep me off balance. She said, "We'll talk when I get back." And that's when she dropped the bomb on me: "I don't love you anymore. I don't want intimacy." Like real cold about the whole thing. I started crying. And she got up and packed a few things and gave me a little pity hug in the driveway I remember. I feel like an alien entered her body and took it over. That's how I felt for a long time after that (long sigh).

Brad's said his wife's birthday was coming up. He, like Amy, still believed they could still save the marriage even after their spouses asked for a divorce. This belief in each of their cases was based on what they thought they knew about their marriages and their spouses. To that extent, neither of them saw contextual issues within their relationships that warranted divorce. Each of them proceeded to move forward based on what they had done for nine and sixteen years, respectively. Brad said,

So me and the kids went shopping. We bought her nice stuff. And she was like "Oh, thanks," but you knew something. And I don't remember the exact, but eventually it was like, "It's really awkward being around you." And she wanted me to move out for three weeks, so she could think about things. So at that point, I agreed to.

Diane discovered something was very wrong in their relationship. She stated, I found a prescription for Cialis on the computer, on our statement. My husband has always been an extremely, easily arousable man, so to find this was rather shocking because I never would have thought he would have had an issue with that. When I confronted him with it on the phone when he was away on a business trip, and I said "This must be a mistake," he said, "Well, there was no answer." And he said then, "No, I use that." And I said "Well, with me?" And there was no answer. And then I said "With someone else?" And he said "We'll talk about this when I get home." He had started refusing sex with me about a month before, and I thought that was very odd. And my red flags went up around that time. We did some marriage therapy, but he was not forthcoming when we went to therapy for the first two times and never admitted the affair until the fourth time when I announced during therapy, after I called him with the

prescription, quite tearfully, “Well I may as well be honest. I have been having an affair for five months, and I am deeply in love.”

Cathy acknowledged her awareness that her husband used substances to cope with life. She stated, “I just think you learn to cope through trials by escaping whether they are alcohol induced, pot induced, or gambling induced.” She continued

He was gambling the day after our daughter died. And because of the person I was and because I felt really bad for him, I let my needs be completely ignored, and I didn't care. That is why I was so devastated when he ended it. I said, “What do you mean? I have been waiting around for eight years! I'm devastated, don't you know?” Even when he had the affair, he just finished it when he was done. Like done! Done! Done! And I think that's how he's done with me! And that's what hurt me the most! How do you not value me, you didn't value me more than that? Like you are done with me? Where was his priority, to say that's my wife! This is the mother of my children! I buried a child with her! She is devoted to me!

Emma sensed something was not right in her relationship. She and her husband were close to moving to the South in their “new start” when she began feeling uncomfortable that something may be going on that she was unaware of. As Emma expressed her devastation, her words and affect revealed a level of trauma and incongruity she experienced by encountering two vastly different people in her husband. Worse, Emma recognized that she had been on a path of living two vastly different lives with her one husband. Emma was shaken to the core as she tried to make sense of living through and with duplicity. Emma had first lived with her husband and planned to leave him, then came back when he told her how much he loved and wanted to be

with her, and finally encountered evidence that his duplicity once again succeeded keeping her in the dark. Emma's fragmented experiences were expressed in these words,

I felt a need to investigate. And when I figured it out, I was shocked! It made no sense! It made no sense! Because I felt our family, we had rededicated it, and it made no sense! Then all of the things I just said, all the trouble we had been through, it seemed to make sense to me also, perfect sense! Because, because I think making those plans to move on, making those plans to build a home, making those plans to have a better life together, I had a hard time grasping onto that and knowing that was what was going to happen. I always felt like maybe the other shoe would drop. I really struggle making sense of it. Because inside, I really believed the way he spoke to me and told me that he loved me. He always told me that he loved me and that I was the one he wanted to be with.

The difficulty Emma had reconciling that she lived two opposing realities was palpable.

Frank and his wife had attended individual and marital counseling, but he still did not feel he was being healed of his "baggage." Increasingly he turned to the Bible and to going back to church. He stated that they "were never churchgoers, but I always felt that I was a religious/spiritual person." He stated that he knew he told her his faith was important to him. He indicated that he never quite linked strengthening his faith with strengthening their marriage, but at one point he decided to talk to her about this. He said

"Look, I'm doing this for us because I have to figure out how I can save our marriage. I want to make our marriage work." She was not happy that I was studying the Bible. I eventually told her "I want to get to a point where I can tell you, put my arms around you, I want to hold you, I want to caress you and tell you I love you, and this is why I'm doing

this.” Then on Valentine’s I bought gifts for her and the girls, but I got very little reaction from her. And that day I just said, “Can I talk to you?” And I said, “Look, I would like to know what your intention is in this marriage. Because I feel like I’m trying and I’m trying and every time I try, you just keep kicking me back, pushing me away.” And she finally said “Well, I want a divorce.” She said “You know, you’re becoming too religious. I’m an atheist, and we don’t view life the same way, and I want my own life. I want to go out and find somebody who I can feel like my soul mate.”

Grace was brokenhearted as she talked about recognizing her husband’s multiple affairs.

She explained,

He never came up to me and said we need to talk, we have a problem. It all started with him lying and covering things up, blaming other people, and making me feel like I was crazy. But you begin to question and doubt everything about yourself because he had said he did not want to lose me and he did not want to lose the family. There’s the old cliché -- he wanted his cake and he wanted to eat it too. I was the one left with can I forgive? And maybe once, yes, but not when it’s an ongoing situation. I wanted to do the right thing and work it out for my family, but I probably knew from the very start that my soul could not take it. It is a soul issue. And I always equated what he did to me as cancer on my soul. For a while I was codependent and allowed a lot of things, and he was not happy with me when I stopped the codependency. And that is what truly exploded. As long as I was quiet and being the good wife-y and had the cancer on my soul.

Heather did not see the divorce coming. She recalled,



He had brought up divorce a few times but then said “Nope, I don’t want to do that.”

Then when he said “I really do think it’s time,” that blew me away. I believe that I immersed myself in my daughter, in the well-being of my daughter, and I never thought he would break up our family. I blamed myself for a long time after the divorce. I was just going through the motions. I was devastated.

*Duplicity, mixed messages and mind games.* As previously stated, all of the participants trusted their spouses and believed that they were in trustworthy relationships with them. However, as Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace began seeing their partners as people, they no longer believed they knew; they reeled from recognition that their partners were also involved in duplicity, betrayal, mind games, and mixed messages. The participants had never considered this information nor would they have conceived it was possible. Each of them had intentionally been kept uninformed. And each of them was stunned at seeing another whole side to a spouse. Each of them was stunned by the myriad ways their spouses manifested duplicity and betrayal that was intentional by virtue of the fact that the information had been concealed. Shocked, these participants felt “victimized” by partners whose actions shattered their assumptions about their worlds, their marriages, their partners, and their very selves within their marriages.

Amy felt cruelly taunted by memories she held of her husband’s frequent messages that he would never leave her. The authenticity of his message appeared to be part of what allowed her to be convinced of his trust. This message had begun even before the couple married. In fact, the whole sense of affiliation and belonging to his family that Amy experienced from before the couple was even married may have intensified the trust she placed in him. For Amy, it was not just her husband she related to, but a whole sense of the family he came out of, not the father

who left, but his mother whom Amy knew and identified closely with. The fact that her husband violated his long-trusted words to her in the end was unfathomable to Amy.

Additionally, this was a message that Amy's children also had heard for all of their childhoods. Knowing that her husband knew how much she trusted his words, Amy felt weakened. Also, other images Amy reported of the couple eating, praying, playing, and being a family together that others wanted to emulate were also images of security and closeness her spouse engaged in. Yet turned inside out, these same images concealed duplicity, mixed messages, and mind games (defined as acts of calculated psychological manipulation to confuse) (American Heritage Dictionary; 2001) that Amy now recognized led into her continued belief in her husband. Only Amy's husband knew ways that she had been kept uninformed. The litany-like way that Amy repeated his words many times throughout the interview provided a hint of how traumatized she felt as she separated out what she believed and whom she believed from what she saw in the sudden ending. Amy lamented,

We sat in the same pew every week, in front of everybody, he told me how much he loved me. We prayed together. He never missed dinner. We had it together as a family every night. We said our prayers at night. We used to pray the rosary for Lent. And the whole entire time, "I'll never be like my dad, I'll never be like my dad."

Amy noted that a month before she was served divorce papers, she was still "praying that our marriage could be salvaged." Divorce papers in hand, she called to ask "Does that mean you're not going to attend the marriage education weekend?" Initially her husband told her he was still considering attending. Then two days later the mixed-message was decidedly clearer when he told Amy that he decided to pursue his relationship with the other woman.

Brad recalled,

Every time I asked her about different guys, she had a quick response, so I would have had to be really distrustful not to trust her I think. She had an excuse for everything and fast, real quick, so she made me believe that everything was fine. I just didn't think she could lie like that.

Even after the divorce was filed, Brad stated that his wife "was still trying to bait me. Like running her fingers through my hair, wearing little short shorts, and putting on a bikini and coming outside, like her behavior was intentionally cruel."

Diane was reeling from the duplicity and mind games she recognized she had been manipulated into as part of the marital relationship that she believed was solid. After her husband suddenly ending their marriage, and after trying to convince her that he had been "unhappy for years," Diane found many sentimental cards her husband had sent her. She more than understood why she had no clue that her husband was being duplicitous. She stated,

Cards that say "You are the most beautiful wife. I could never have imagined a better wife. You are gorgeous. You don't know how much I depend on you, you are the best mother." So I guess to turn around and say that you have been unhappy for years doesn't gel for me.

Cathy focused on difficulty she had recognizing "that my emotional state was deeply compromised because of his lack of attention and true honesty and love towards me." She stated,

It came to a point where I was basically the caretaker for the children. He would come home at night, and we would co-exist, not at all realizing this, me, not realizing that he fell out of love with me and not realizing that my emotional state was deeply compromised because of his lack of attention and true honesty and love towards me. I

didn't know it was gone. Because I was so blown away, because he said he loved me so much. He was a phony in front of my very good friends, so it was very confusing to me. So I'm saying to myself "Why do I feel like this, so alone, but yet why are my friends saying you are so lucky, look at how he's still so into you." He played an act to my girlfriends instead of telling me something isn't right here.

Emma sadly recognized at the end of her marriage that mind games her husband played with her kept her off track. "My husband consistently told me that he loved me and I was the one he wanted to be with." She appeared embarrassed at having to admit how misled she later recognized she had been by her husband. Painfully, Emma pieced together ways that he led her off track even as she began having hunches something may not be right. Emma recalled with a raised voice, "Even when I started to figure out that he may be having another affair, he said he loved me, and I was the one he wanted to be with!" As if recognizing in hindsight that her husband had effectively watched her be thrown off track by his deceptions and mind games, Emma appeared sad and lost. She worked hard to unravel messages she was given that unwittingly baited her, thereby following him in deception. Emma stated,

He was saying those things before he left and even after he left. He said, "You know I love you" even as we we're discussing this other woman. Him saying "You know I love you and think you are the most beautiful, creative person" was so confusing (Emma softly cried and covered her face, giving an appearance of shame for believing his words). When I was getting the intuition that he was cheating, that he was chasing someone, and I was talking to him about it, he just kept saying "There is nothing going on." I said, "If you are, we are not going to get our house, we are not going to have a

marriage or a house.” And he said “Oh, I don’t know what you’re talking about. You are acting crazy. I love you and you know that.”

Emma struggled to make sense of two simultaneous and conflicting messages that her husband sent that deceived her.

*Shattered Assumptions.*

Janoff-Bulman (1992) wrote, “Our fundamental assumptions are the bedrock of our conceptual system; they are the assumptions that we are least aware of and least likely to challenge” (p. 5). She went on to write, “The essence of trauma is the abrupt disintegration of one’s inner world. Overwhelming life experiences split open the interior world of victims and shatter their most fundamental assumptions” (p. 26).

Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace believed that what they saw in their marriages is what they would have forever. Until each one of them began having hunches or signals that something was awry, or that something more may be going on that was intentionally concealed from them, all of them believed in their spouses and in their relationships. In fact, all of them believed words and messages spoken by their spouses that in the end represented duplicitous mind games. As Brad stated, “I would have had to be an untrusting person not to believe when she swore on our kid’s lives that she would never cheat.”

For participants who had invested between nine and thirty years in their marriages, the shattering that accompanied reversals in the knowledge of who they were married to was traumatic. For them, this was not only sudden, unexpected divorce. It was sudden, unexpected divorce with additional stressors of abandonment, duplicity, betrayal, lies, and victimization. As clearly as each of those participants did not know what was going on behind the scenes, their spouses in all cases did know what was going on behind the scenes. These spouses essentially

lived two lives. Amy's, Brad's, Diane's, Emma's, and Grace's spouses knew exactly in what ways they were keeping Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace uninformed.

All of these spouses allowed these participants to believe they were happily married while the spouses alone knew about their other worlds duplicitously hidden from their partners. Even as Emma began having hunches there may be problems again, her husband sent her cards saying he was "gaga over her" and that she was "crazy" for doubting him. The participants would never know, with certainty, the period of time the spouses engaged in this duplicity. Amy discovered contact with another woman from the year before her husband asked for divorce. Brad learned at the end that his wife had had multiple affairs within their nine-year marriage. Diane, by chance, discovered her husband's affair after five months, but, with the amount of travel he did and long periods of time away from home, she believed in the end that he "fully intended to stay married to me and just continue to cheat." "He was a fake!" Diane shouted! And Grace's marriage "blew up" the minute she pushed a little harder with her spouse when things just did not seem right.

In exploring aspects of traumatic life events, Janoff-Bulman (1992) noted that challenges to an individual's basic assumptions almost always include that person as the direct victim of threat. It is not any negative life experience that produces trauma, but something unique in the event that assaults our assumptions about the world and ourselves.

Although threats to survival are most apparent when the possibility of physical injury or death are present, such threats may also be engendered in events that entail abandonment and separation. The woman or man who has lived for and through a spouse and then experiences his or her death or divorce is apt to confront frightening questions of self-preservation. (p. 59)

Janoff-Bulman further noted that some situations involve “human-induced victimizations” (p. 78). These are described as victimizations that involve perpetrators who harm or violate others. Janoff-Bulman noted that, although the ruthlessness of the perpetrators may differ, survivors of human-induced victimization are left confronting questions of trustworthiness of people. “They experience humiliation and powerlessness and question their own role in the victimization” (p. 78). Janoff-Bulman highlighted that for survivors who have been victimized by a parent, spouse, or friend, the breakdown in interpersonal trust is particularly acute. They are inclined to engage in self-doubt that is focused on their feelings of powerlessness and helplessness incurred by another human being. Janoff-Bulman observed, “Victimizations that do not involve perpetrators are apt to be humbling, whereas human-induced victimizations are more appropriately characterized as humiliating. Human-induced victimizations affect survivors’ core beliefs about themselves” (p. 80). Each of the interviews of Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace revealed vulnerability associated with the shattering of their assumptive worlds, compounded by human-induced victimizations.

Amy felt her sixteen-year relationship depart from normally established patterns and routines from the moment her husband first struck out in uncharacteristic anger toward her. He blamed her, she stated, when she initially mentioned that he seemed different. Subsequently, he had little contact with her while travelling for business. Then he abruptly stopped holding her hand when the couple was at a carnival and another couple arrived. None of this made sense to Amy as assumptions she had long-held about their relationship initially became challenged. As Amy increasingly sensed that more was askew, she pushed harder. The pieces of their relationship were no longer coming together in a good fit. Upon probing the issue of her husband’s non-responsiveness to a loving email message she had previously sent him, she was

stunned by his response, "I meant to talk to you about that." In an unceremonious moment that followed, Amy's husband told her that he no longer loved her. And, he no longer wanted to be married to her. Her assumptive world blown apart, Amy continued to take steps leading her to discover what her husband knew that he never told her: He had been having contact with another woman for a year before he ended the marriage. In fact, "It was the same woman he had been dating and planned to marry, but his mother didn't like her, so he stopped dating her, and started dating me" Amy revealed, voice trembling. Amy's assumptive world was shattered, her trauma evidenced many times throughout the interview by the litany-like repetition of words her husband stated many times over the years to reassure her he would never leave her. And as if to bolster her belief in herself at a moment when intrusive feelings of self-doubt were beleaguering her, Amy said,

He became a Catholic before we got married. We both decided it was such a big part of who I am, and he wanted to be part of it too. And then just throw that sacrament away! I'm having a really hard time with that. Because I just never thought, I just always believed that, the more prayers, the more work we did, but he's such a different person! This isn't the person I married. And that is so hard!

Amy's affect and tone revealed the vulnerability and powerlessness she felt. "I was simply looking for security in him" she stated quietly, head lowered, voice trailing off. "I guess because my dad died so young. And I was so young. I was really looking for security." As if this was something to feel ashamed about, Amy closed her interview with those words. Within a few short months Amy's assumptive world had been spun from one of belief and belonging, a leader among other families to another of broken trust, powerlessness in a marriage, and shattered assumptions.



Brad's assumptive world became shattered when he first began encountering inconsistencies in his wife's behavior. His first hint that something was not right was when his wife announced "rather suddenly" that she no longer "felt special." There was no basis that Brad could see for this change in heart she expressed toward him, other than the fact that he had gained weight. Although his wife complained that he "didn't put the laundry away or keep the house neat," Brad believed that these statements paled next to her strong feelings of "not feeling special." A number of times Brad doubted his wife's fidelity, but each time she swore on their children's lives that she would never cheat. Brad saw her attempts to make him feel bad for doubting her as "manipulative." In true victim stance, discrediting himself and his intuitions that something was wrong, he sent her a card saying "I'm sorry if I hurt you," apologizing for the entire situation, and trying to make it work." There was a time when Brad made a list of things he saw he could do to improve himself. His wife joined him, telling him, "I may be falling in love with you all over again." Brad fully trusted these words from his wife as a signal that the couple was moving forward. Instead, as Brad later painfully recognized, his wife used those words and others like them to throw him off track from what she knew all along that she did not want him to know: his wife had been cheating on him for much of the marriage, way before she ever went to him saying she no longer "felt special." Brad stated, "She wasn't willing to take responsibility for herself, so she blamed me. She did it in a way that she was comfortable with to avoid confrontation." "I blamed myself," Brad continued, "for much of what was going wrong in the relationship"

Brad, similar to Amy, had his own litany-like way of repeating many times through the interview that this was "his first real relationship," as if that were something to be ashamed of, or implying that, had there been more relationships, he might have avoided being "played." In the

end Brad felt taken. He stated, "She made me believe that everything was fine for that brief period, so I feel like it was a manipulative, deviant plan all along." Brad knew that his wife watched him take her seriously, trying as hard as he could to improve himself to save the marriage, while she alone knew that she had been unfaithful to him for a very long time. Brad summed up a marital experience that in the end left him feeling victimized by saying, "I feel abandoned. And purposely hurt."

Diane's husband had an affair many years prior. And, although it could be considered whether Diane should or could have prepared herself for another event of infidelity, Diane responded to that saying, "It was a very long time ago." Except for a "sexual gap" that Diane noted existed between them, Diane thought the marriage was fine. Upon finding a prescription for Cialis on their computer, Diane was shocked by new events leading her to know there was a problem. She stated,

I have been shocked to the core! I was not being told the truth! I was shocked! I was not prepared at all! Financially, mentally, I had no clue this was coming! He'd had that earlier affair a long time ago, and I trusted him with my life after that. We went on to have two more children! I never thought that, I knew that we both perceive that time period as extremely painful, and I never would have guessed in a million years that he would go down that path again to cause such pain to both of us.

Revealing how her assumptive world had been spun around, Diane stated, "I have to remind myself that he wasn't real! It's hard to believe that he wasn't that person. He had everyone fooled!" Diane, like Amy and Brad, would not have found out what her husband intended that she not find out had she not investigated further once she sensed his duplicity. Finding her husband's love letters to another woman in the same house that stored all of the love letters he

had sent Diane over the years crushed her. "I never thought he would go down that same path again" Diane repeated, her voice trailing off. And then, not dissimilar to Brad who initially assumed responsibility for the problem, Diane talked about all those business trips he wanted her to join him on, dropping everything with five children to be with him. She stated,

Logistically, it was hard for my parents to be with them and manage five sports. And I kept saying to him, "Can't this just wait a couple more years until the kids, and then we'll just travel the world." I thought it was mutual. I thought we had discussed that. And I thought he agreed to it, but apparently not. And he needed to be with somebody.

Diane's vulnerability was apparent, her assumptive world in a state of shattered dislocation.

Emma was particularly traumatized by her shattered assumptions. Through the interview Emma revealed her experiences of living in a marriage with a spouse who lived in two distinctly separate worlds. In the end, Emma conceptualized these worlds as "boxes" her husband lived out of which perhaps prevented him from recognizing exactly how many different worlds he lived out of. Emma's trauma revealed itself by her struggle to put words to the experiences of living with two different people. On one hand, she was ready to leave him because he had been so hurtful and mean to her. On the other, he told her how much he loved her and did not want to spend his life with anyone else. Emma loved her husband and loved the "new start" he promised her they would make together. His prior affair had been three years' earlier. In a symbolic ceremony of renewal, the couple had "rededicated" their family back to God. Emma expressed full trust that her husband's words were who he was.

As the time grew nearer for the family to move to the South into their new home and new start, Emma had hints that old behaviors might be resurfacing. She confronted these and him. He told her she was "crazy" as he reassured her frequently of his love and his fidelity. The

moment Emma recognized his duplicitous behavior that concealed information that he intended for her to never know, Emma's world became fragmented. This was revealed as she tried her best to talk about what made "no sense" that also made "perfect sense." Emma almost made no sense herself as she tried to capture her experiences. Without an understanding of how victimized Emma felt by the duplicity she had experienced, it might not make sense. She stammered,

I struggle with, I don't understand, it doesn't make sense to me more than it does, just because there's just so much. There's just so much! Life is just; I just thought we made a life together. But it's not how I see it. It's not how I see it! The life we made together, it's not how I see it! And there is nothing that I could do. There is nothing I could do to stop this from happening.

Emma was a bright and articulate woman who, based on what she was attempting to report, could hardly form her words. Emma felt overwhelmed by feelings of powerlessness and self-doubt. Hearing Emma try to make sense of her event echoed Janoff-Bulman's (1992) words "Human-induced victimizations affect survivor's core beliefs about themselves" (p. 80). Emma struggled to try to make sense of how she believed his words. Even worse, her hopes, dreams, beliefs in him and herself, and the new life she planned with him were shattered.

*Infidelity.* Infidelity played a significant role in the endings of Amy, Brad, Cathy, Diane, Emma, and Grace's marriages. It did not take long within Amy's close-knit family system for their teenaged sons to become aware that something was very wrong. Their father's absence from attending church services with them one Sunday morning shortly after Amy's husband told her he no longer wanted to be married led the boys to ask what was wrong. What happened from there reflects a profound ripple effect that infidelity had on the entire family.

When the boys inquired why he was not in the car, he responded that he was going to go later. When the boys got back into the car and asked me what was happening, I said "I have some really bad news. But we're going to the right place to deal with this. Daddy doesn't love me anymore and does not want to be married." They started kicking the doors, screaming, crying, and ran inside, yelling at him.

Once Amy knew about the affair, she described vast changes in her spouse. One of the biggest changes she noted was the diminished amount of time he spent with the boys.

He would go into their room and tell them that he loved them, but wouldn't sit upstairs with them, wouldn't watch TV with them. He sat in the basement by himself all the time. The kids asked me to have him get out. So I said to him, "Please leave," and he said "I am not leaving, this is my house." And finally one night he came home, I got up at 4 o'clock in the morning, and I said, "Please, please leave." He said, "I am not leaving." I said, "Please leave, we cannot live like this."

After Brad's wife confronted him with the sudden, unexpected ending of their marriage, Brad found documentation online revealing the longevity of his wife's unfaithfulness. He recalled his reaction upon finding evidence of her infidelity.

I was like holy shit, look at all this stuff on here! There were all these messages going back quite a few years! But then it was I wonder how far along she really has been cheating? I didn't catch her until after that, but I wonder if there was cheating before that. There were all these messages from a girls' weekend, all of this real high school, locker-room banter. Then I found one, "I would love to meet with you and talk about divorce," all of this shit was happening before she ever came to me and said, "I don't feel

special.” Like another whole person! Like I’m sick of wiping noses. I want to get my drink on, and all this stuff that blew my mind! Then she moved out.

After Diane confronted her husband in therapy about the Cialis prescription she had found, and after he told her that he had been having an affair for five months and was deeply in love with another woman, Diane revealed that she “hacked into his email account.”

In there, I found all of these love letters to this woman from way early on. He wrote that, “He could never go back to his unfulfilling wife” and to say that this has been an utter shock to everyone. I had no clue he was unhappy. He was so affectionate to me in front of our children, not disgustingly so, but my children would tease us and say, “Oh mom and dad, you should get a room.” In front of our family and friends we were thought of and perceived of as the most loving, cute couple.

After Emma followed her intuition that her husband may be cheating, he responded by telling her she was crazy for doubting him because he loved her so much. He followed up by sending her a card saying, “Emma, you are so beautiful, you still make me gaga after all these years.” However, that same night he failed to come home. Not only was Emma distraught, but, similar to Amy’s situation, Emma’s teenaged daughter became aware something was very wrong.

I kept on texting and calling him, and he did not answer. And finally at one in the morning I called him and said, “If you are alive, you need to call me back or let me know you are alive.” My daughter was up so I thought I would go to the train station to see if I could see his car. So she stayed home with the kids. But I was low on gas, and I thought I’m not going out on this cold, windy night, so I went back in. And he texted me back and said, “I am on my way home. I’ve been drinking and am in no mood to talk to you. I

saw you spying on my computer and I didn't like it. I don't want to see you when I get home. I don't want to talk to you." The next morning he was to leave for a trip abroad. I'd made chocolate covered strawberries, and I had champagne. I was going to make it a nice evening. My daughter heard a lot. So initially she knew there was trouble. And then, when she found out I was crying a lot and she heard me talking to him, she said how could he cheat on me. And she knew then. She really, over a period of months, her anger grew toward him, and she decided she didn't want to talk to him anymore. Because she saw him come, and she saw him leave. And she knew he would just come and go whenever he wanted.

Cathy talked about her husband's affair. After realizing that he was "done" with her and their marriage, she described his affair this way,

The affair was not an intimate kind of romantic involvement in the sense that they went out and bought each other things. It was calculated. He made sure he chose someone who was married, so that when it was done, it was done. He cut her off emotionally the same way he cut me off emotionally. They texted all the time; constant attention, attention. It was an escape. His job started going south, and he needed another thrill and they basically started having sex and just a very lusty and sleazy relationship.

Grace acknowledged that after she recognized her husband had been unfaithful to her for a long time, she and her husband argued. She described it this way,

It was so hard to look at him. It was like a hot poker just sticking in the wound. You know, I never had the chance to heal. It is like throwing salt on the wound every single day. And the cancer would just get bigger and bigger. The affairs were just continuing to go on.

*Addictions.* Two of the participants recognized the role that addictions played in the demise of their marriages. Cathy acknowledged awareness of her husband's addictions throughout their marriage. She recalled that one of the things she was most attracted to in him was his ability to live in the moment. She said,

He never got stressed. In all of my life of knowing him, life just seemed to fall into place for him. He would move and shake with many different social communities, whether younger, older, blue-collar, white-collar, he could definitely be a chameleon in all of it. And I feel that attracted me. As the years went on I think the escape that wasn't really an escape when we were younger really became an escape for him. You learn to cope through the trials by escaping whether they are alcohol induced, pot induced, gambling induced, going-out-at-night induced. Everything was just about bolting, just bolting. Alcohol played a very big part in my marriage which I never realized how much along with other substance abuse. I think he's searching for something he doesn't even know, some fake happiness, something to fill a hole in him. And his priorities changed, his priorities of the family, marriage, of what love is.

Frank recognized at the end of his marriage that feedback and advice that a friend in recovery from alcoholism had given him many years earlier was indeed accurate. Alcohol had played a significant role in Frank's marriage, even though he only recognized this at the end. He stated,

I now consider my wife to be an alcoholic. It's bizarre because I had a friend of mine who is an alcoholic who is sober, who was living with me as a roommate before I got married. He was an alcoholic while we were friends, but he became sober during our friendship. And he said to me, "Do you realize she is an alcoholic?" And I said, "What



are you talking about, she doesn't drink much more than I do, and I do not think I'm an alcoholic." And he said, "Yeah, but it's different. She drinks to numb herself. Just watch her. She takes her glass and goes away to drink by herself." He said "An alcoholic does that." But I never saw this before, until now with the divorce. It's gotten to the point of a couple of glasses of wine a night. I told her "I don't like the idea of the kids seeing you drink every night." I asked her to keep the wine out of the house for a couple of weeks to see if you can do it. And she couldn't. She would stop for two weeks, but then the wine would show up. And it progressively got more and more to the point where it was three glasses, then four glasses.

Diane stated,

He brought me porn movies in January, the night before he said he wasn't coming back. Because sex was his issue, I was willing to perform certain things, trying to hang on to any thread that we could save. I realize that was the wrong thing now, but it let me see how low he would go to use me. He kept calling me for phone sex and was masturbating. We would go for lunch, and he would say he was "so hard," right here in Panera, "I would like to rip your clothes off." He was treating me like a sexual object, now I know. I thought that meant there was something to our relationship, now I know that it wasn't.

*Role of family-of-origin divorce issues.* The roles that family-of-origin issues played in five of the participant's marital endings was significant.

Amy completely believed in, and was guided by, her husband's frequent references that "he would not be like his father" when it came to divorce. It was evident that Amy's belief and trust in him and his words contributed to the sharp destabilization she experienced at the time of

sudden, unexpected divorce. Amy's frequent references to the many assurances he made to her were variously stated in these words,

I knew forever that his parents were divorced. From day one he swore to me that he was never going to be like his dad. He always said that he would never, ever be like his dad, never, ever get divorced. He would never leave the kids, he would never leave me. The old saying the apple doesn't fall far from the tree? He used to laugh and say "Mine did. Mine rolled down the other side of the hill. I'm never going to be like my father" (Amy cried).

Amy stated that she did a family history on her husband's side of the family. She found out that "All around the age of 45, they all got divorced. Marriages in the family last between seventeen and eighteen years."

Brad indicated that his parents had been together for nearly fifty years. He stated that, though there had been periods when they fought, and his father was a "self-absorbed jerk," they always stayed together. With the template of his own parent's marriage as the backdrop he worked from, Brad observed, "So in my mind, with hardly any fighting between us, and she swore on the kid's lives that she wasn't cheating, I had no reason to distrust her."

Cathy revealed her own parent's divorce with dreaded memories. She recalled, "That was extremely painful. That was right when we got married. And if there is one thing I ever wanted not to happen in my life, it is divorce. Because that was so painful for me at such an old age, at 27, I would never want to pass that on to my children. I would have done anything. And I think the fact that it was devastating for me, I realize in some ways, I was in denial of rocking the boat because I felt like he was eventually going to say, "You know what? Your aspirations, your, the way you look at life, your faith, I

don't believe any of it. And we're not compatible." And I always felt in the end, I was just hoping God was going to get his heart on his own, and it wouldn't have to come to this.

As previously noted, Diane stated that, because her spouse's prior affair was so painful for them, she never would have guessed in a million years that he would go down that same path again to cause such pain. Of divorce in his family-of-origin she added she never thought he would do this to his children. She said,

Never to his children. Because you asked about the children, and his father did the same thing when he was younger. He was ten when his father flew to another country and got a divorce. This was on his parent's wedding anniversary! My husband never had a good relationship with his father. His father would have, even with a background as a nurse, and now that I've been observing my husband, he obviously had a personality issue as well.

Frank discussed his perceptions that his wife's parents' divorce blocked her ability to gain emotional satisfaction she really wanted in their relationship.

Boy, there is so much complex stuff you know. She has her own issues of her parents being divorced and her own feelings about what happened with her father and mother.

She also had some molestation issues. So I don't think it's easy for her to be close. She wanted closeness, but couldn't be close to somebody herself.

*A Simultaneous Process of Dying – While Living: The Emotional Process of Sudden, Unexpected Divorce for Participants and Their Children.*

As participants experienced their relationships in profoundly altered ways, all of them agonized over far-reaching changes in their families. As Amy emotionally blurted out, "I felt

like I was drowning! Like I was being held under water!” Diane shouted, “I feel like it’s a death. I feel like I am mourning the person he was!” Each new day called on them to get up, methodically and mechanically doing what they had always done. But the floor, the very core of their lives was gone, torn apart in a way that took a great toll on each one of them. A part of them was dying while the other part of them still needed to live if for nothing or no one else, their children, whom each of them loved immensely. As participants described their experiences, and those of their children, it became exceedingly clear that their lives were forever changed by a sudden, unexpected divorce. In Amy’s, Brad’s, Diane’s, Emma’s, and Grace’s marriages there were issues of betrayal and duplicity to heal from as well. Participants no longer knew how to respond. Their worlds and their children’s worlds were shaken and dismantled. Some of the children begged that the parent leaving them never return. “He’s a kook!” one shouted while another struck out in anger saying, “And don’t call me on my birthday, I don’t want a relationship with you!” The trauma of no forewarning took its toll and created its crises. These crises were unspeakable, having been inflicted by partners they believed were their best friends, who suddenly pulled the spouse and the family’s rug right out from under them. This made what felt like “amputation” for Grace even worse.

Subthemes that emerged through this fourth theme included (a) reactions of participants (parents who were left), (b) reactions of children, (c) other significant stressors, and (d) what participants told themselves.

*Reactions of participants (parents who were left).* All of the participants had strong emotional reactions to the sudden, unexpected endings of their marriages. These included feelings of fear, outrage, shock, powerlessness, confusion, helplessness, abandonment, and distrust. Many of their reactions were amplified by reactions they experienced their children

having in the face of sudden loss of the other parent. Amy cried frequently through recounting her devastating losses. More than any other specific mixed message or mind game, Amy struggled terribly to make sense of the ending to a trusting, loving, and extremely involved marital relationship she and her husband had shared throughout their marriage. Her trust was shattered. And the heartless way her spouse ended their relationship brought Amy to lows she never felt before. "I called it holding me under water. Like I'm drowning!" Amy sobbed.

Amy agonized through much of the interview trying to make sense of the "before" and "after" man she knew and loved. "We went to church and pretty much cried the rest of the day" she explained, signaling a loss of their earlier routines which would have included her husband. "He is living in a fog. We all are. He definitely is living in a different world" Amy stated. Even months after her husband told her he wanted a divorce, Amy said "I won't use the word begging, but I was praying that our marriage could be salvaged. I was devastated that he had decided to cut off everything."

With a sense of defeat and exhaustion Amy observed,

So much of a shock as it was for him to leave there was a sense of peace. I had not eaten in two months. I lay in my bed a lot. Nothing got done. For the boys, depression was there.

Brad's reactions to the mind games and manipulation he was pulled into were particularly painful and clearly confusing to him. Reflecting a lack of clarity he had about where he stood with his wife in the marriage he stated, "I was like in trouble, then I thought I was fine, then I was in deep trouble." He was stunned when his wife approached him saying she no longer felt "special." Believing they were married for life and being all-too-self-conscious that he had never had another long-term relationship, Brad did everything that he knew to try to make things

better. With hindsight, he recognized how he was played all along and that his wife had been cheating on him for years prior to coming to him saying she no longer felt “special.” “We have a great family! What are you doing?” was his initial response when his wife came in at 2 a.m. the first time.

Continuing to be horrified by how his life was changing with nothing he could do or say to stop those changes, Brad’s statement’s revealed feeling a total loss of personal power.

I was a mess. My world was turned upside down. I felt like an alien entered her body and took it over. What grounds would you even divorce me on? I didn’t know about no-fault divorce in this state. I had no idea you could say you fart too much and get a divorce. I mean I had no idea!

Brad’s conceptualization that an alien entered his wife’s body and took it over captured his sense of moving from best friend to total stranger. He no longer knew her. He felt that he was played. He was reeling from the recognition that his spouse took advantage of him and manipulated him even further as she saw him taking her feelings to heart, making changes in himself, and then betrayed him anyway.

I feel like it was a manipulative, deviant plan all along. The trust, we have this family. How can you do that? You get married believing you’re married for life.

The thoughts you go through – I’m going to take a gun and blow my brains out right in front of her, so she is scarred for life with nightmares, to I am going to find the most beautiful woman and throw it in her face and be super happy the rest of my life. That’s the range of emotions, from I’m so depressed I don’t want to live anymore, to I am going to have such an awesome life after this.

Brad revealed his confusion and self-blame saying,

I just didn't think she could lie like that! It was my first real relationship. I had dated other people, but nothing serious. In the beginning I wanted to be with her because I could be myself, but, in the end, I was walking on eggshells. I'm not sure what a normal, healthy relationship would look like, what it is.

Diane was absolutely devastated. Trying to figure out how to go on after having experienced intense deceit and duplicity she stated,

I feel like it's a death. I am mourning the person I thought he was. One of the reasons I fell in love with him even as a young man [was this.] We met in high school, went through college together, exclusively, only had eyes for each other. I feel so duped and cheated by this this man, because of his background, he always was different in high school in that he stood up for what he believed in; he was always so honorable. He read a lot of philosophy about ethics and morals and all sorts of things like that. He went to a military school, and took an Oath of Honor. I so looked at that as an honorable person. And now I know that those two things, it doesn't mean that the person has that same constitution when it applies to their personal life. That is a hard lesson for me to figure out. . . So I feel I am mourning the person, and now I'm realizing pretty much he was a fake throughout. . . He was leading a double life. That is how I look at it now.

Cathy was shocked when her husband and best friend, the man she fell more in love with after the death of their child, whose personality she consciously decided to "accommodate" during their marriage, left her.

I believe that I was completely betrayed. I think he was emotionally abusive to me! I basically let him do whatever he wanted to do. And he basically turned on me! He betrayed me! And he doesn't see any of this! That's why I'm absolutely hysterical to the

point where I wanted to kill myself. Because I'm like "What do you mean? What do you mean? You had the affair, I took you back! I forgave you and worked and worked on it! What do you mean? What do you mean?"

Emma was depleted. She struggled to grasp what was happening. She was lost for words as she tried to describe her experiences of having encountered two distinctly different people in her husband. Emma had been ready to walk away from the marriage the first time her husband betrayed her. But because he was so convincing and because she really wanted to believe him and share a life with him, she transcended her own wariness and agreed to begin their new life together. Frequently her husband told her he loved her and she was the one he wanted to be with. Even as Emma suspected that her husband may be having another affair, he would say to her "I love you. You are the one I want to be with." "How could I ever be prepared for this?" She asked herself rhetorically. The rawness of Emma's pain washed over her in waves during the interview. The narrative process appeared healing to her. Emma intermittently blamed herself for believing him, while at other times she knew exactly why she did! She appeared tormented by her experiences.

I really struggle making sense of this because inside, I really believed the way he spoke to me and told me that he loved me. He always told me he loved me and that I was the one he wanted to be with. . . He said, "You know I love you" even as we were discussing this other woman. He was saying, "You know I love you, you know I think you are the most beautiful, creative talented person," . . . now very confusing. And so being prepared for this was absolutely out of the question! There was no way I could be prepared for this . . . because I just felt this whole surge of like a new beginning! Before the ending I was trying so hard to make it work! It just makes no sense! My take away is I feel that he's



been unfaithful many times. And that he kept me because I have his children. I do believe that he does still love me in his heart in one of those boxes, but I'm not his life. Like a wife should be his life. And I struggle with, I don't understand, it doesn't make sense to me more than it does, just because there is so much.

Emma worked hard at framing and depicting her thoughts and the experience she was living through. Her confusion and sense of great loss were palpable. It was evident that the narrative process was healing for her in a bittersweet way. She continued unraveling her sudden, unexpected divorce reactions saying,

When he would be really good to me or the family, that was the person I wanted to see all the time. But I did not get that consistently from him. But he used words, very powerful words with me, to kind of keep that picture alive. Like "You are so beautiful, I love you, you are such a beautiful wife and mother." There is no way I could be prepared for this! Because I just felt this whole surge of like – a new beginning. I feel really insecure. It makes me feel like all the things he said to me about being beautiful and wonderful, it makes me not want to trust what people say. I feel like I have no voice. I am trying to be strong and trying to rise up out of it, but it's hard to not feel strong right now. I feel weak. I feel very alone. And even though friends come around and say, "You're not alone, we will be there for you," I still feel alone. Some sort of bottom fell out (Emma softly sobbed).

Frank related how hard he took the ending of his marriage. He stated, I mean, for the first six months after she told me she wanted a divorce, I went into lots of spirals, hills, and valleys. I was very depressed. I had a very difficult time. I literally felt I was in a free fall; I felt my world had been knocked out from underneath me. I felt like

the very foundations of my life were gone. I couldn't connect; there was no larger community for me anymore. You know, my home life wasn't there. I had some connections, but I wouldn't call them friends, and it was like wow! I feel really alone! I remember how, in tears, telling her, somewhere around four or five months later, on my knees, saying "Please, can't we see if we can make this work?" Abandonment issues are very prevalent for me. When I get rejected, I would withdraw. I thought it was going to work. I was thinking, oh God, this isn't what was supposed to happen! Why are you letting this happen to me? And as part of my abandonment issues, I felt that even God was abandoning me.

Grace, more than any of the other participants, acknowledged feelings of fear after the divorce. Having been a stay-at-home mom, she had no career skills, nor did she have the finances to go back to school for another degree. She described her emotional reaction this way.

Everyday a piece of me was dying. He was trying to make me feel like I was crazy, when I knew I wasn't. But you just begin to question and doubt everything about yourself. Emotionally, it has robbed me of all my trust in myself, my trust in others, it has affected the way I look at myself, the way I feel about myself, as a person, as a woman. It has robbed me of my sensuality, of the way I view the world, the way I think the world views me because I think everybody knows, and the shame just is at such a deep level. It's emotionally crippling to the point of not being able to function through the day. You know, it hardens you. I wish I could have been emotionally stronger.

When somebody chooses to break the family, nobody wins.

Grace, like most of the participants, drew heavily on the strength she felt from her faith. Her emotional reactions were filled with feelings of loss of power and control in the relationship. She said,

I'm trying to be who God always intended for me to be from the get-go and not to waiver from that. It has taken me a long time to understand. And I don't know if anybody else knows this yet, but (Grace cried) the reason it hurts so bad is because I loved him so much. And my intention was completely different from what it ended up to be. And I had no control over that.

Heather, similar to Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace internalized feelings of shame. She stated,

It was rocky in the beginning. I was very unsure of myself, just you know, very rocky. I had a lot of insecurity. That I wasn't good enough, that I would never meet anybody ever again. That was important to me at the time.

*Reactions of children.* As might have been anticipated, major changes in the family constellation brought many reactions from the children. All of the families in this study described themselves as close families. Six of the participants described idyllic family relationships with minimal amounts of discord. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the children were shocked by the endings of their parent's marriages and reacted strongly. In fact, in some instances, the children refused parenting time with the parent who left.

As stated previously, Amy's two teenaged sons were immediately aware of changes in the family. In addition to the family being an emotionally tight knit group, the boys and Amy were particularly close. Each of the boys had been diagnosed with learning disabilities and Amy spent long hours with them each day on homework. The Sunday that Amy's husband did not join them for church services, Amy was open and honest, allowing them to know there were

problems. Many times during the interview, Amy stated the high value she placed on trust and honesty with her sons, both before this event and surely during it. Additionally, she was supported by the family therapist to maintain strong trust relationships with their sons, *especially* during this period of family upheaval.

Amy reported that her sons slowly began going online and on to Facebook to see what they could learn about their father's relationships after he left the family. They were curious. Her younger son had seen an email sitting on his kitchen table from a woman talking about missing him and about recipes. This younger son presumed this was a friend, but did not consider it was a girlfriend, or the woman his father left his mother to establish a relationship with. However, Amy's older son asked her directly if his father had a girlfriend. It was at this moment that Amy stated she could not lie and, therefore, responded to her son's question honestly. Shortly after, when their younger son still believed that his father was working to save the marriage, and upon her older son hearing him talk about this woman who left his daddy a note, her older son reacted. "I'm telling him right now, Mom" he said to Amy, and immediately proceeded to tell his younger brother that their father had a girlfriend.

To complicate the situation, Amy stated that her husband did little to help maintain or reinforce the established relationships he had with his sons. She stated,

For four months he had very minimal contact with the boys. He said he had too much at work. They would call him, and he couldn't talk. He was the coach at baseball, and he would sit on the bench and not say a word.

Diane reported how angry her young teenaged daughter was with her father. During a time when Diane still hoped they might reconcile, her husband came to the house. Their

daughter said to him, "Please don't come here anymore. I don't want you to come here anymore! I don't want you to help me with my homework."

The day after her husband told her he wanted to divorce, their older teenaged daughter asked Diane to take her to meet her Dad in a parking lot. She wanted to meet her father to have a conversation with him.

She went to get into his car to tell him what she thought of him. She said "Dad, don't call me on my birthday. I do not want a relationship with you." During the time she was explaining this, he said, "But you don't know how unhappy I was." When she said, "I really don't care how unhappy you were, you made the wrong choices," he said to her, "You don't care about my unhappiness?" Guilting her, a kid! The kids think that he is a kook! My youngest daughter said to me yesterday, as he was texting them, that he should abandon them, which my lawyer said is probably going to happen. He is texting both of the girls, and they do not answer him. My one daughter said last night, "Mom, only a mad person would continue to do the same thing over and over expecting to get a different result." This is a teenager. My twenty-one-year-old asked me why I'm worried that they won't have a relationship with him. I said, "I'm fearful that you will think this is a good way to live your life." She said, "I've never had a relationship with him in twenty-one years, why would I start now!" So she obviously has felt something about him all along. She said, "I never thought that he would cheat, and it doesn't hurt me the way it hurts you because I saw him in a different way than you did."

When it became time for Frank and his wife to tell their children about the divorce, he was adamant about not being the one to tell them. His daughter, going off to college right around the time his wife announced that she wanted a divorce, tried hard not to be affected by

the news. She said, "I just want my parents to be happy and if that's what it takes." His wife took this oldest child out to dinner to talk to her. When she returned, Frank and his daughter made eye contact. He could tell that she was crying, and he followed her up to her room to talk. "She cried, and I explained things the best that I could." His wife took each one of the children out to tell them. Frank's thirteen-year-old son had a much harder time. Frank shared,

My son was down in the basement when I got home. I went to talk to him, and he was upset, and it was hard, tears and crying. Then the last one was my youngest daughter, 10. My wife decided not to take her out but to tell her in the basement. And the only thing I remember hearing is a scream from my daughter. And it just cuts, and, you know, I went down and was really, obviously upset. And she's one of my three children, and, although the youngest, she is the most perceptive of all of them. I spent time with her, and, after a while, she said, "I want to be left alone." I said, "Okay, I'll be in the house. I'll wait for you." And I remember she came up and went into the computer room to play games. I went in and sat down next to her on the bench. And she said "I want to be alone Daddy." And I said, "Well I understand you want to be alone, but I don't want to leave. I want to be by you." And she kept playing for a while, and my wife left again. She left the house. And my daughter said, "Where's mom?" And I said, "I don't know." And she said, "Is she in her room?" And I said, "No, she is not in her room. I don't know where she is right now." I spent time with her, and she began relaxing a little bit more, and then she went to bed. And the next morning I woke up and didn't want to go to work, so I took the day off and stayed home until she woke up. My wife stayed home as well, but she went out. And I said to my daughter, "Why don't we go see a movie," and we went to see Harry Potter. Driving down the road my daughter said to me "Hey Daddy, if

Mommy helps other people with their problems, how come she can't help herself with her own problems?" And I said, "You know, I wish I had an answer." She asked a few more questions, and I said, "We'll get through this somehow," I said, "You still have a mom, you still have a dad, you still have a brother and sister, you just," and she said, "Yeah, but I won't have a family"

Brad's children were quite young at 4 and 6. He stated,

We shielded the children until we said we're getting something called a divorce. I let her do the whole thing. My son, six, started to cry, but then it was like "Well Daddy is going to live where you are living." And he said to his mom, 'Will you live next door?' And she said, "Close."

Emma's children were 3, 8, 11, and 13. Emma recognized that her children were going through tremendous emotional upheavals. There was increased acting-out behavior among the children, and she, like all of the participants, was a loving, child-centered parent who focused on the children. Despite what she was personally going through herself, or perhaps more so because of it, she was tightly connected to her children through the family trauma.

She said,

My eight-year-old son cries when he talks about it. He says he misses his daddy. He misses how Daddy would play videogames with him. And if there's an extra cookie, he will say that he will save it for Daddy. My eleven-year-old son will not cry. He's being really tough. He is angry, so angry with his father. He has been acting out in a very goofy, trouble-making way. One night when my husband left abruptly, all hell broke loose. My son was picking on everybody. He was defiant with me. It was just a very bad night. He got in a bunch of fights with all the kids and locked himself in his room.

He opened the window and crawled out, and I had to find him. After I found him, I talked with him outside, saying it's way too dark and dangerous out here. It is not a place for an eleven-year-old boy to be. And my three-year-old son screams a lot. But even he's been saying, "Where's Daddy? Did Daddy go to the south? I want to see Daddy." And my daughter, thirteen, feels like it's all her fault. That if she would have been better and acted better because she's almost thirteen and emotional, that it's her fault. She cries a lot. She was daddy's little girl. But she does not want to talk to him or see him now.

Grace's children were sixteen and eighteen. She stated,

I don't care how old you are, knowing that your parent is with someone other than your mother is tough. They are hurt. I think they also learned from me to be quiet and just accept everything that he's done and move on. My son, who is the oldest, articulated more than my daughter. He was able to say to me whatever happened is between you two. My daughter has always had the role of the caretaker.

Heather explained that her daughter, 17, was diagnosed with a developmental disorder when she was four years old. She explained,

Back then she knew we weren't living together anymore. She didn't know the specifics of it. Now she's older, and we talk, and she asks questions. Now she's starting to get to the point in her life where she's thinking what went wrong? How come grandma and grandpa are married fifty-one years and you and Daddy aren't? We've been to therapy. She was going through issues when her father was dating and bringing his girlfriends around, and that is still a big issue. She says, "I do not want to spend time with them, I want to spend time with him."



*Other significant stressors.* Two of the participants in this study, Amy and Frank, had other significant stressors concomitant with the divorce.

Frank reported an awareness he developed during the divorce process that “abandonment issues became very prevalent for me.” Based on the integrity and honesty he brought to his marriage, he believed the marriage would work. He was stunned and became exceedingly anxious by his wife’s response, wanting to divorce. He stated, “This isn’t what was supposed to happen. Why are you letting this happen to me? And as part of the abandonment issues, I felt like even God was abandoning me.” Frank became more keenly aware of his extreme anxiety level as his daughter began looking at colleges that were out of the area. He said,

I don’t want to think about you being three hours away! I’m not sure I can handle that!  
And I went home that day and I went into a spin I never experienced before. Anxiety,  
and this intense feeling of abandonment.

Frank stated that he called his sister because he “had to talk to somebody.” He explained “I was scared! I was having this anxiety attack and I never had this – like panic!” His sister got on the phone, and Frank could barely breathe. “I couldn’t even say my name. I just broke down crying.” When he got to his sister’s house “suddenly everything came pouring out about all the rejection I felt in my life, and this sense of abandonment.” Frank added that he took “a lot of ridicule” in his childhood from youngsters who made fun of him. “The abuse made me very sensitive, and I was very hurt by it.” As Frank was talking to his sister, “I told her about this thing, I had this memory of, I’ve really got to clear this up with Mom.” Shortly after, Frank called his mother. He stated “The same thing happened again. I just broke down. I couldn’t get anything out of my mouth. I got to my mom’s, and my sister joined me.” Frank had not told his

family about the divorce in the preceding months, but he did at this family meeting. He then stated,

I told them these feelings of rejection I was having that I was losing my family. I felt my whole foundation collapsing underneath me. I felt very lost, very scared. I said to my mother “I have got to ask you something. Do you ever remember me spending time in the hospital when I was young? I would say I was three or four at the latest?” And she said, “Well, yeah, you had your tonsils out. It was an emergency, and it was scary.” I said “How long was I there?” And she said “One or two days, overnight.” And I said “Were you able to stay with me?” And she said, “No, it was different in those days. They basically took you and told me I had to leave.” And I could remember crying and crying, plus the pain I was in. And I was thinking where did Mommy go? What happened? And I asked my mom, “Do you remember the nurses? Were they warm?” And she said “Well, not really. They were doing their jobs.” And in those days there was the stainless steel cribs, and it was a very sterile world. And here’s what happened, here’s what I remembered: I was alone. I wouldn’t stop crying. And the nurse took me over by the window. I was two or three floors up. And I remember the nurse taking me to the window, showing me outside the window, and told me if I didn’t stop crying she was going to hang me out the window until I stopped crying. And if I didn’t, she would let me go. I was terrified! And I said, “Mom, I’ve held this thing in my head; and I’ve never told anybody about this thought. I mean, does it sound reasonable?” And she said, “Yeah, it does. It sounds really, . . .”

Frank summed up his old, now resolved memory by realizing “I think all my sense of abandonment was wrapped in that moment! And I never understood where I had such fear of hospitals.”

Amy experienced a betrayal in her counseling relationship that stressed her deeply. She explained that initially the family had done three sessions that went well, all related to the divorce. She stated, “She was good and called my husband on everything. He clearly was the reason we were there.” Then the children refused visitation with their dad. There was a period of time where he threatened to file parental alienation charges against her. Amy said that the therapist met with the boys explaining to them that, if the court ordered them to visit, it would not be Amy, but their dad, and that Amy would have to force them to attend. However, Amy noted, her husband opted not to file alienation charges, but got their clergy person involved instead. The children were very involved with the church and had a good rapport with him. His message was at odds with the message reinforced by the therapist. Although he did not tell the boys they had to visit, he “strongly encouraged them to keep an open mind. So the boys got very mixed messages” Amy stated. “Here was the therapist saying stand your ground; if you don’t want to see or talk to your dad right now, you don’t have to.”

At that point Amy decided to invite her husband back to family counseling. The children and the therapist thought that was a good idea. The sessions did not go well. A session was cancelled, and Amy was not inclined to schedule any more. Her younger son refused to go and begged Amy not to force him. They were seeing the same therapist who guided Amy to be honest with her children and to support the trust relationship between them, so Amy trusted her continued support. Then Amy had an individual session with the therapist that went very poorly. Amy stated, “I felt like she had completely twisted that I had done everything right, to now

saying you are damaging your kids by not seeing their father.” Amy informed the therapist that her younger son refused to attend counseling. The therapist then called the home at ten o’clock one night, asking to speak directly to her son. Her son did not know who was on the phone, but Amy heard him saying “Yes, okay”. When he got off the phone, her son was hysterical crying, feeling that Amy had set him up. Amy called the therapist back saying, “How dare you! How dare you do this to me, you knew I was vulnerable, how dare you!” Amy sobbed, reacting strongly to the loss of a trusted counseling relationship that she relied on to help her.

*What participants say to themselves about the ending.* Emma tried to make sense of the duplicity she experienced with her husband in this way.

I think maybe he was in a bunch of different boxes. Like, I just feel like I was a box. You know, our home was a box, one of the boxes. And, when he left us to go on a business trip around the world or to go south, those were all different boxes. His behaviors would change with each box. I think women in different places; I think since he was in a different box, he could be with them, too. I, my takeaway is that he has been unfaithful many times. The loss of my dreams hinders me. The feeling that I had relying on him, it was like we are going to have so much more stuff, a better house, I’ll take you places around the world, London, Paris, just all those dreams and finally feeling like a dignified family that moved past all the junk. Those dreams, if I start thinking about what I’m losing, it makes me feel very weak. And weak from the loss of the love that I had from him.

Cathy talked about “having to really let go and deal with his rejection of me.” She acknowledged that, as her husband got further and further into substance abuse, she was “drowning in complete depression because I wasn’t feeling anything anymore.” She stated that,

as he changed and became more lost in addictions, she did not “want to make waves for him.” Cathy talked about the jobs that he lost and grieved for the years she waited for his life to fall into place. She reflected, “I used to have so much stress in my life because he always threw me curveballs.” She continued,

He could never go outside of the box. He used to in the beginning, but as he got older he became more selfish. I was waiting, waiting for him to stop the poker playing, waiting for him to get his new job, waiting for him to feel happy. Everything was just contingent on him! And now I feel like I’m not waiting anymore. I am enjoying the quietness of just coming home, and I’m not worried about how he is getting home and if he’s drunk. I didn’t even realize how that used to weigh on me.

Amy focused on her multiple losses. “My sense of my husband is he’s living in a fairytale right now. He’s in a fog. He’s doing what he knows to do and that is to walk away.” She observed that she lost forty pounds through the divorce. “Trust is the biggest issue on the line right now” she stated. “My older son has a wall up. We do not know who my husband is anymore. Those are not my words. These are my kids saying that.” Amy expressed her earlier belief that her husband would come to his senses. He would somehow recognize his mistake, and come back.

I’ve heard so many stories about people who, their husbands do something stupid like this, and then, you know, one day they wake up, and right before the divorce, they say you know what, I’m making a mistake. But he’s just such a different person. This isn’t the person I married!

Amy struggled with the ambiguity of her loss and could not make sense of it. Entwined with the loss of her marriage was the loss of a good counseling relationship that she originally believed

could help her husband see the error of his ways. As her children reacted to changes in their father, and as they refused to have a relationship with him, a reaction that Amy believed was a temporary one, Amy was held accountable for this. Her understanding of the failure of counseling was

They started to see me as the problem instead of the real problem which was my husband's behavior! That has just been so hard for me! The boys have had their own reaction to all of this, and because they don't like the reactions, I'm the problem! Diane expressed one aspect of understanding the demise of her relationship this way, What do I say to myself? I say how did I not know that the person I was married to, how did I not see that he was not a loyal partner? I see how me taking charge in the house and doing many things in his absence for his business or his career fostered my own independence to a point where I am fully capable of handling everything. And I see that me handling everything probably aggravated the situation. I didn't know that at the time. I thought he was proud of me for being independent and handling everything.

Grace connected the ending of her marriage to her refusal to remain co-dependent and silent with her spouse. Once she stopped overlooking aspects of his behavior that she sensed were not honest, she stated, "That is what truly exploded. He was not happy with me when I stopped the codependency." Grace was sure that her husband's long-term infidelity and ending of their marriage stemmed from his family background. Since she and her husband carved out the vision of the traditional family they became, Grace was stunned to learn about his long-term infidelity at the end. Grace considered her husband's infidelity as "cancer on her soul." Innately she understood that she could not live with this cancer. Feeling shocked and traumatized by the loss, she viewed their divorce as "amputation" of the cancer.

Brad struggled all along to understand what happened to end his marriage. He believed that had he been more experienced in relationships, he might not have been in the position he found himself with his wife. Looking back, he understood how allowing himself to be guided by her, rather than listening to his intuitions, was part of the problem. He stated

She pushed everything. When we got together, she was like, "Oh, I'm in love with you" after two weeks. "Here's my key, move in." We worked at the same school, so I knew her from work. We had one date and lived together. We had sex every night straight. No dating, just lived together immediately. In hindsight, that's an unstable thing to do from the beginning so full force. That would be a huge warning sign for me now. Then it was "Let's get the house." We were looking for a house just a few months after we got together. And she had us getting married just a few months after that. It took a year and one-half in the end, and I thought that was fine. And I blame myself for getting too comfortable too quick. In hindsight I think I could have been Mr. Nautalus and it still wouldn't have been good enough. My brother-in-law is completely dominated by her sister in their marriage. I would rather be dead than be clawed. She didn't buy into what a marriage really is about. On the surface, you don't see these qualities.

*Meaning Making: A Constant Process of Deconstruction and Reconstruction.*

A constant theme of deconstruction and reconstruction took place as participants tried to make sense and meaning of their stories. Their constant guide was the person they originally were, who they worked hard to reconnect with now. As Grace observed, "I'm trying to be who God always intended for me to be from the get-go, and not to waiver from that." Trauma, shattered assumptions, and ambiguous loss replaced their previous contexts as happily married people. A coupling process that took years to build was gradually dismantled, replaced by the

arduous work of a slowly transpiring uncoupling process. A strong sense of faith and spirituality emerged as participants clung to faith in God Whom they believed would see them through. Cautiously, they sorted through the remains of their shattered assumptions (Janoff-Bulman, 1992), trying to build bridges that might allow them to cross wide rivers between what they once thought they knew, and what they knew now. None of the duplicity, deceit, and lies of their partners made any sense from the perspectives of what they thought they knew; therefore, participants were working hard to reconstruct new meanings based on the sudden endings that transpired. Few of them expressed denigration or negative feelings toward their spouses. Yet all of them felt damaged, depleted, and immensely manipulated by the ways their partners betrayed them.

Wounded and shattered as they were, three of the participants worried about their spouses. In fact, Cathy feared that she would visit her spouse in a funeral parlor, dead, a casualty of his own devices. She felt compelled to sit and tell him what she saw as if to mirror to him in advance, that which she believed he could not see. Amy was particularly hurt by a therapy process that she believed interfered with her husband seeing the error of his ways and the hope that, once seeing, he might have returned. And Frank, upon recognizing the extent of his wife's alcohol addiction, did all that he could to be protective of her and her relationships with their children while being cautiously protective of the children.

The support of family and friends was key in all of their lives. As Amy said, "I could no longer hold it in, and people in the neighborhood started to know." Diane commented that, when she got to the part in a Lenten service that read "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" she turned to her friend taking heart, saying "Well, I've never been that bad." All of the participants were child-centered people who cared deeply about their children and about their



roles as parents. They worked hard to nurture their children in very broken places. From looking for a child who ran away into the woods late into the night to sitting with a little one who refused to talk, all of the parents put their children first. In spite of their own brokenness, their needs never overshadowed or pre-empted those of their children. In fact, seeing the devastation their children were experiencing as a result of being involuntarily co-opted into a sudden, unexpected divorce experience, participants felt strongly about leading innocent children out of the maze.

There was a dominant theme of strong family values initially identified in their earlier stories. Now, re-attaching to one of the few pieces of their earlier family identity that was not destroyed, participants and their children grasped the strength of those values to help move themselves forward. Meaningful interactions between participants and their children became part of the fabric of deconstruction and reconstruction for the families. Using the warmth, comfort, and familiarity those family values provided, participants moved beyond the sudden ending, attempting to create new families. "Family" would never be the same as Frank explained to his ten-year-old daughter. But "You will still have a family. You just won't have a mommy and daddy who are married."

Sub-themes portrayed through participant's narratives were (a) going on, in a changed but meaningful way, (b) parenting as a priority, (c) I felt like I had an army behind me, and (d) where would I be without my faith?

*Going on in a changed but meaningful way.* All of the participants were changed by sudden, unexpected divorce. Frank recognized that his wife was an alcoholic. As the divorce she initiated moved forward, Frank received a message from his wife that had definite suicidal overtones. Far from her at work, he called her and got no answer. He attempted to reach her

therapist to no avail. Feeling desperate, he contacted the police who checked up on her.

Grieving the life he once shared with his wife, including the “baggage” that existed between them, Frank began finding new meaning in his role as the head of his family, alone. As his little girl cried, Frank consoled her saying,

You’ll get through this somehow. You have a mom. You have a dad. You have a sister and brother. To her cries of “Yeah, but I won’t have a family,” Frank responded, “You will have a family. You will just have a mom and dad who are not married anymore.”

Once Cathy recognized how unfocused she had become in her own life as she became totally immersed in her husband’s life she stated,

I am 100% sure there will be light again in my life. I went through the loss of a child. You can’t tell me that I can’t put my life back together after someone leaving me. I’ve got my health. I’ve got my children. The hardest part was letting him go . . . .

Brad recognized at the end that his wife had gone through a “mid-life crisis through Facebook, and she wasn’t willing to take responsibility for herself so she blamed me.” With good counseling he felt that his life was moving forward in a more enlightened way. He recognized that his wife “did it in a way that she was comfortable with to avoid any confrontation.” He stated, “Now I understand why she didn’t want to go to any kind of counseling. How can you go to counseling when you’ve done all that despicable behavior that would have to come out?” Brad’s meaning reconstruction in the end focused on knowing that he had been deceived and betrayed, but he had willingness to “really look at myself and try to understand what a healthy relationship is, how it should look, and how you are influenced by your family because that’s what you know. “

Despite how low and far down Emma's spirit had gone, Emma made meaning and believed she would reconstruct her life and the life of her children as a result of how down she was. Emma did not know "how," but she felt supported by an inner-strength that allowed her to know that life would go on in a changed, but meaningful way. She stated,

I believe very much in the concept that out of death, life comes out. And this is a death! This is a death! So out of this, there is going to be new life, and I want my kids to get that message. So they don't have to be – so they don't have to stay down. So that belief keeps me going. Knowing that I have more inside of me than just that idea that I was his wife.

Diane had to continue to work hard to force herself to reconcile the "before" and "after" conceptualizations she had of her husband. The more she could get ahead of their past history together, the more she knew she could begin the family's new, changed life. She stated,

In the beginning I was moaning to my mom they don't have a father! And my mother said to me, "So what is better, having all these arms around them or a person with two arms around them who is fake?" So sometimes I find myself reverting to thinking about him as he presented himself to me. And then I have to say oh, it's so hard to believe that he wasn't that person! He had everyone fooled! And to think that, when he opened his mouth, how I would respect and respond to him!

Diane reflected on what it was going to take to move forward. She said,

I am the kind of person who would sit home and do cross stitching and count my blessings. So not only has he taken the marriage, but my self-esteem, my mental health, and now the house is going to be going! His lawyer was badgering me about employment saying, "Well, what is it you want to do?" And I felt like saying, "Look,

asshole, I've been doing what I want to do. I had the life I wanted that my husband and I set forth and now he's changed the rules."

Heather, who had begun her new and changed family life with her daughter, was moving forward, after an initial rocky start. She observed that "In retrospect, it's the best thing that ever happened to me. I am very happy, content; I'm peaceful now."

Grace observed that moving forward had a lot to do with her. She stated, "Not living together anymore has been a great relief, in a sense that the wound is beginning to heal. However, the next chapter of worry is different, that is about me. How am I going to get through the rest of my life? How will I pay my bills, that kind of thing. But I think the two of us being apart has given the kids an opportunity to see us as individuals. I think it's been healthier. I'm feeling better now, but it hasn't always been like this. It's been a lot of work!"

*Parenting as a priority.* Cathy described with enthusiasm a party she was planning for her children. She stated, "I'm having a kick-off-the-summer-party, no stress! I used to have stress in my life all the time because of the way he threw me curveballs."

Frank clearly made parenting his priority, especially upon recognizing how absent his wife was to their children. He coached and encouraged his children through the divorce as they became a new family.

You know, I told my youngest, this is one aspect of your life. There are lots of other aspects that are not broken, so you need to remember that. I try to make a point of doing things with them, making sure they know I'm there for them. I'm hugging them and telling them I love them.

Brad prided himself on being child-centered. He identified that he was the parent who was always more involved with the children, brushing their teeth, and playing with them outside. He believed that the children were so used to the family not being together doing things, that the divorce was not strangely different to them. He stated that he “would say let’s go out and play, and they had such a good time. We would go to my mom’s house or to the pool.” Brad attributed some of his child-centeredness to being familiar with developmental levels of all age-groups of children.

Diane, in addition to coping through her marital losses including the family home, plus focusing on finding a career to support herself, kept close watch on her children. When one of her daughters showed potential signals that she might benefit from counseling, Diane made a verbal contract with her. Together they came to an agreement about what increased symptoms to look for, which would indicate that it was time to seek professional help. It was evident that Diane had established warm and loving relationships with her children. She indicated that one of her older sons planned to move home to help with finances and house upkeep.

Emma made a concerted effort to go to her daughter’s school to tell them her daughter would benefit from having an identified teacher to talk to if she struggled through the school day. Emma described strong feelings of responsibility to her children. She stated,

I feel so much more pressure with the responsibility of bringing up these kids to be responsible adults. And I feel the weight of having to be there for each and every one of them through all of this pain in the house. I’m dealing with my own pain, but helping them deal with their pain. I’m trying to be all the roles, you know, stay cheerful enough, but be a policeman enough so they don’t hurt each other. I try to summon out of myself special little moments where I can just give each child a little extra love. When I become

aware of them just moving through life, I'll stop and hug them. They really need that right now. They need a lot of extra love and lots of extra cheerleading. I'm trying to tell them how much I love them and positive things about them that are good. I've tried not to forget that. They are struggling just as much as I am.

Amy consistently identified that parenting her teenaged sons was a high priority for her. Amy's sons had learning disabilities, and she spent long hours doing homework with them every day after school. Amy's son's reacted strongly to duplicity and deceit that ended Amy's marriage. Amy felt cheated by a therapy process that she perceived became counter-productive at the very moment that her sons and she, herself, needed it to the most. She also believed that counseling relationship sabotaged family progress at a moment where the family was trying hard to find meaning in their divorce event.

*I felt like I had an army of people behind me.* Eight of the participants reflected on the strong supports they had in their lives. Brad's reflection, "I felt like I had an army behind me. That helped me a lot!" mirrored the support many of the participants experienced from those others around them. Brad added, "I thank God for the support of family and friends!" Brad was helped through the legal process by his supportive networks, especially in the area of parental rights. Brad was clear that he wanted either full custody or fifty percent custody. He refused to be a visiting father.

Emma acknowledged strong support systems surrounding her. She stated, "I have wonderful neighbors, and I have a great church. I also have a support group that I attend. Diane commented on her prior good deeds in the community, noting that she never did it expecting anything in return. Now that her kindness was being returned to her, she reflected,

The good that I have done in the community, I never would have thought to call up on it anytime. I just did it because I love doing it. But now I see how it works, and I never thought about that before.

Amy observed that family supports have been extremely helpful for her and the boys. Also, teachers at the school that her children attended had been supportive.

*Where would I be without my faith?* Seven of the eight participants focused on the strength they derived from faith in God. Cathy spoke clearly about the strength she derived from her faith. As she grappled with the ending of her marriage, the strength she derived from her faith was a meaningful part of her deconstruction and reconstruction process. She reflected,

Knowing that God works for good to those who love Him and that He can work any disaster out, that He really could turn ashes into beauty helps me. I know that after grieving and sorrow, the light comes again. The sad part for me is that that light may happen without my spouse. But I am 100% sure that there will be light again in my life.

Emma clearly identified the role that her faith plays in her life. This came up within the context of her talking about looking for her son who had disappeared in the woods late one night. Emma identified that her strength and ability to manage that situation comes “from a place of prayer.” She added,

A big part of the strength that I get is probably coming right from God, because I asked for it. You know, I believe in that. And I think it’s going to be big part of my family’s growth and recovery out of this. I also believe in telling others that you are weak and that you cannot do it, that you are worried or scared. Me saying please pray for me, or please keep an eye out for my kids. That is a big thing.

Heather also acknowledged the support she gains from her faith. She stated, "My faith has helped me a lot."

Amy cried when she talked about the role of her faith in her life. She said, "And my faith? Oh my goodness, I would not be here today without it". As noted previously, Amy's faith was such an essential part of her life when the couple met that her husband converted to her faith so they could share that aspect of their life together.

### *Conclusion*

This study of meanings parents make of sudden, unexpected divorce involved the participation of eight parents. The parents were married within a range of nine to thirty years and had children ranging in ages from four to twenty-six years of age. Each of the parents participated in semi-structured interviews which lasted between one and two hours.

Case studies for each of the participants were presented in an effort to illuminate the ways in which individual parents were affected by the sudden, unexpected divorce experience. One theme that was obvious from these interviews was that all of the participants were shocked and devastated by the sudden endings of their marriages. None of the participants saw the divorce coming. Many of the participants hoped that their marriages could be saved even upon learning that the spouses wanted to divorce. Some of the participants felt particularly betrayed as their spouses saw them working hard to improve the marriage, while they continued their involvement in extra-marital relationships. Mixed messages and mind games made it appear in many cases that the spouse was working on the marriage too, only for the participant to later learn that such was not the case. As their marital worlds crumpled around them, participants were highly invested and concerned about their children, who likewise were reeling from chaotic events that sudden endings brought to the family's daily routines. Some children were so angry



they refused visitation while others remained engaged with the other parent, causing tension between parents and with siblings in some cases.

Included in each of the case studies was a brief section outlining my experiences of conducting the interviews with the participants. These sections were developed based on the field notes that were kept throughout the course of data collection and analyses. The field notes facilitated my ability to remain aware of my biases, reactions, and experiences of the participants and of the information that they shared. Additionally, through use of the field notes, I was able to identify themes that were emerging early on in the data-collection process.

The themes section of this chapter contains the themes that emerged across cases. The data-analyses procedures described in Chapter 3 revealed five primary themes, including, I thought I was married forever, believing the best, discovering the worst, from best friend to total stranger, a simultaneous process of dying - - while living, and meaning-making, a constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction.

In the chapter that follows, a discussion of the results that were presented in this chapter will be explored. The results will be discussed as they relate to the three research questions posed at the beginning of this study. Additionally, the results will be viewed in the context of the previous literature on families and divorce as well as effects of sudden, unexpected events. The limitations of the study will also be discussed. Lastly, the implications for practice and research, as well as directions for future research, will be addressed.

## CHAPTER V

### Discussion

#### *Introduction*

The purpose of this study was to examine meanings that parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce make of the events. A goal of the study was to gain access to the voices of those parents who had experienced sudden, unexpected divorce to contribute research findings to a body of literature that currently contains a paucity of information about this specific type of divorce. The research was guided by a phenomenological research design which guided the analyses and development of patterns and themes revealed through the participants' narratives. A semistructured interview protocol was followed to assist the participants with sharing their experiences. The following three research questions guided this investigation: (a) What sense do parents make of divorce that was sudden and unexpected? (b) What effects has the divorce had on families experiencing sudden, unexpected divorce? and (c) What contexts and themes help families to deal with a sudden, unexpected divorce?

The parents who participated in this study discussed their marriages openly. Some of the participants had been through difficult times in their marriages, but all of the participants believed they were married forever. Five of the participants described severe reactions they had upon ultimately learning that their spouses were involved in duplicitous relationships. Betrayal added to their pile-up of losses in traumatic endings to their sudden, unexpected divorces. Participants' narratives revealed a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction as they tried to make meanings out of endings that seemed to make no sense at all.

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings presented in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of the contributions of the present research and the clinical and theoretical implications for the findings. The chapter also includes a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

### *Summary of Findings*

#### *Research Question One: What Sense Do Parents Make Of Divorce That Was Sudden and Unexpected?*

The first research question explored in this study was what sense parents make of divorce that was sudden and unexpected. One of the most significant findings in this study was that all of parents whose marriages ended in sudden, unexpected divorces experienced a pile-up of losses associated with the sudden endings of their marriages. These included divorces that were unilaterally imposed by one partner with an absence of the other partner being part of the decision-making process; abandonment issues connected to divorce that was unilaterally imposed by one partner over the protests of the other partner; and, for five of the participants, the discovery of duplicity and betrayal of their partners relative to the sudden endings of their marriages.

The first loss included divorce that was unilaterally imposed. The decision to divorce in all cases was made by one spouse, unilaterally imposed upon the other spouse with no discussion or forewarning. Participants' words, expressed through the interviews, revealed gaping holes that existed between relationships as the participants lived them and realities that they later discovered. Seven of the eight participants noted favorable relationships between them that included no arguing. All of the participants believed that their marriages would last forever.

A second loss included effects of abandonment and sudden endings. Participants struggled to comprehend meanings of words spoken to them by spouses who moved from best friends to total strangers. "Cold" and "cruel" were words used by participants to describe changes in spouses whose behaviors devastated and shocked them. The effects of shattered assumptions and ambiguous loss numbed existing world views for participants who tried to make sense of contexts that no longer seemed to make sense at all. In tightly coupled relationships that previously found partners turning to one another for comfort in times of distress, it was painful for participants to recognize that their partners were the very ones who inflicted pain and distress that led them to need comforting. This intensified feelings of victimization and isolation for participants. One noted, "I feel abandoned. And purposefully hurt." Ambiguous loss filled them as participants no longer knew how to "be" in relationship with their partners.

A third loss for five of the participants included shocking discoveries of duplicity and betrayal that their spouses were engaged in. These included extra-marital relationships that had been concealed from the participants. Not only were these betrayals actively concealed from the participants, but in three of the five cases spouses engaged in further deception, mind-games, and mixed messages to dissuade participants from pursuing their intuitions that some dynamic was wrong.

None of the participants saw the divorce coming. Words used to describe reactions they had to sudden, unexpected divorce included "shocked," "powerless," "tragic," "abandoned," "incredulous," "unprepared," "duped," "cheated," "clueless," "insulted," and "outraged." As stated previously, all of the participants, whose marriages spanned a range of from nine years to thirty years, believed that they were married for life.

In addition to five participants who discovered duplicity and betrayal in their marriages, one of the eight participants knowingly “accommodated” her husband’s substance abuse. She also was aware of an affair that her husband had engaged in. She was shattered when, despite her willingness to “look the other way,” he unexpectedly ended the marriage anyway. A seventh participant intensified his spiritual life as a path toward a more vibrant and loving marriage. His spirituality was used against him as his wife sought divorce. He “begged and pleaded” to no avail. An eighth participant was shocked and devastated as well. This participant moved from “It made no sense at all,” to “Looking back, it makes all the sense in the world.” After recognizing that her energy had been focused on a young child diagnosed with learning disabilities and that her husband “had a volatile personality where he would explode at me for stupid stuff,” this participant recognized that she “failed to see signals in the relationship that she should have seen.” After a “rocky beginning where I was very unsure of myself,” this participant reconstructed her life and moved forward.

Ahrons (1994) noted that abrupt separations usually create severe crises for those left behind. It is the ultimate rejection, abandonment. She observed, “The abandonment leaves one feeling totally helpless and frequently culminates in a severe debilitating family crisis” (p.111).

Becvar (2006) further noted that, in situations in which one spouse has already decided that the marriage is over, the non-consenting spouse is faced with special challenges. One challenge is “coming to terms with the added pain of rejection for which there was no warning or preparation” (p. 196).

In exploring sense and meanings that participants made after sudden, unexpected divorces, strong feelings of trauma and powerlessness prevailed. Marriages that participants once experienced as tightly coupled partnerships uncoupled instantaneously. Spouses, once

considered best friends, stepped out from behind curtains of duplicity as total strangers, shocking and terrifying partners who had once been so intimately involved with them. There was no room for duplicity; duplicity that once exposed left abandoned spouses with shattered world views and ambiguous endings. One participant described an ending that, once she looked further, “just blew up!” Loss of their spouses felt like deaths for participants who “mourned” their marital endings, one re-conceptualizing her husband as a “fake throughout, who was leading a double life,” whose duplicity was kept from her all along.

Five of the participants shared similar dynamics. All of their spouses blamed them for circumstances that led to them being abandoned. Consistent with Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) characterization of shame and humiliation that survivors of human-induced victimizations experience, each of the participants bore this additional burden at moments when they were at their lowest points.

Anderson (2000) identified abandonment as one of our most primal fears. She noted that the devastation of abandonment can stem from different circumstances, including the nature and duration of the relationship, the intensity of feelings about the relationship, the circumstances of the break-up, and one’s previous history of losses.

Results of this study revealed that all of the participants suffered losses inherent from abandonment. These strong feelings were based on the longevity of their marriages, believing that their marriages were strong and solid, and believing they were married forever. Loss and abandonment issues also arose from each of the participants’ genuine efforts toward making their marriages better, and from watching the devastating effects that the sudden endings had on their children. The circumstances of the break-ups in all cases significantly contributed to feelings of abandonment that participants experienced.

Sprenkle and Cyrus (1983) reported that an experience of marital abandonment is unique. Therefore, the abandonee has no prior experience to help cope with the event. Ahrons (1994) likewise pointed out that prior life experiences do not facilitate the experience of abandonment in divorce.

Seven of the eight participants discovered secrets that led their marriages to end in sudden, unexpected abandonment. For Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace these secrets involved duplicity through extra-marital relationships. For Cathy and Frank, their spouse's secrets were concealed through alcohol and substance-abuse addictions. Diane reported a "sexual gap" that existed between the couple. Her statement "Who could keep up with him sexually?" coupled with his statement that he would like to "rip her clothes off" while having lunch might suggest that Diane's marital ending hinged on both infidelity and sexual addiction.

Sudden endings, betrayal, loss, and the traumatic reactions these responses engendered are significant issues in divorce. If abandonment was sudden or unexpected, Anderson (2000) noted that shock and disbelief first set in. These must be addressed before one can begin to grieve the loss. Abandonment grief is described as having a life of its own, stemming from circumstances that led up to it and from feelings of rejection and inadequacy that accompany it. It was evident through the research interviews that processes of deconstruction and reconstruction were also processes of participants' grieving their losses.

Hoge (2002) focused on the complications inherent in the co-occurrence of grief reactions and the presence of trauma within the context of sudden divorce. She distinguished between grief and trauma responses, observing that divorce leaves its mark on almost all who go through it, but, under good enough conditions, people are able to grieve the loss of their partners and go on. Hoge identified an ability to grieve the partner as key to letting go of the marriage.

However, when marriages end in sudden and traumatic ways, the one who is left may not react with grief, but will suffer trauma. Hoge made the point that, unlike someone who is able to grieve, a traumatized person becomes numb to any warm or fond feelings for the former spouse. Other authors (Anderson, 2000; Raphael, Middleton, Martinek, & Misso, 1993) also observed that, in cases in which trauma and grief reactions co-occur, it is first necessary to deal with the traumatic event which may block grief before grieving can be successfully completed. Harvey (1998), similar to Hoge (2002), observed that successful grief work involves finding acceptance of the lost person in memories rather than banishing those memories.

In this study, Heather appeared to be the only participant who had achieved resolution of traumatic feelings stemming from abandonment issues that ended her marriage. Based on her ability to discuss “signals she could have seen” that would have helped her be prepared, Heather “learned a lot” from her divorce and had moved on. As stated previously, other participants appeared to be actively working through their grieving processes. Several participants expressed gratitude for interview experiences which seemed to indicate relief they found through the narrative experiences.

One participant described the role her parents’ divorce played in her adult life. Another learned that marriages in her husband’s family-of-origin last about the same length of time as he remained married to her. And two other participants discussed divorces in their husbands’ families-of-origin.

Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace all recognized that their spouses never intended for their duplicitous behaviors to be exposed. Once Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, and Grace all got closer to duplicitous behaviors their spouses concealed, their marriages ended.



*Research Question Two: What Effects Has the Divorce Had On Families Of Sudden, Unexpected Divorce?*

Because of close family ties that participants described in marriages that they believed would last forever, traumatic endings had ripple effects on both the participants and their children who were still living in the family homes. From a systemic perspective, Figley (1989) described a subjective understanding of traumatic stress. Figley observed that the connections family members have to one another helped explain why they are vulnerable to stress, particularly to traumatic stress. In a systemic way, when one member in the family is upset, efforts are made by everyone to reduce the stress and thereby to correct the problem. Figley described traumatized families as those “who are attempting to cope with an extraordinary stressor that has disrupted their normal life routine in unwanted ways” (p. 5).

Boss (2006) reported that ambiguous loss is inherently traumatic because the inability to resolve the situation causes shock, confusion, disequilibrium, and often, immobilization. All of the participants in this study expressed many traumatic feelings of ambiguous loss.

Root (2010) highlighted divorce for children as “an issue of *being*.” It is the author’s contention that experiences of humanity and our very *beings* are upheld in community. For each one of us, the core community is one made up of a biological mother and father. Therefore, he stated,

When that community is destroyed, it is a threat to the child’s *being*. Divorce should be seen as not just the split of a social unit, but the break of the community in which the child’s identity rests. Divorce is much more than a psychological or sociological reality. It is about something deeper than economic advantage, psychological stability, or social capital. Divorce is a threat to a child’s very ontology, to his or her very *being*. When the

community that created a child dissolves, the child is left exposed not only psychologically and socially, but ontologically. When divorce or separation occurs, the biological parents say, possibly with words but definitely with actions, that they desire for their union to no longer be. But the child *is* the result of their union; the child has his or her primary *being* in relation to the community called family. (p. xvii)

What were the children of participants reacting to through their outbursts upon learning about the break-ups of their families? Not having heard the children's voices directly as part of the study, we will never know for certain. Based on words, actions, and affect reported by participants, one possibility is that children were expressing terror for the loss of *being* they experienced through the loss of their family communities. Parents who were abandoned may themselves have shared as co-partners with their children's terror in the divorces.

Root (2010) contemplated issues of ontological security for children of divorce. He noted that divorce and single-parenthood have often been considered societal issues. Divorce can be seen as playing a role in poverty, delinquency, or poor educational performance. At its core, divorce has been seen as an issue of social capital in which connections between young people and adults, who provide the personal and relational currency to avoid or overcome pitfalls such as delinquency, are cut off. We have assumed, Root noted, that, if we can provide young people who experience divorce with enough social capital, the divorce itself will be neither debilitating nor traumatic. Parents are encouraged to separate without visible conflict and are urged to find ways to provide emotionally and economically for the children. If this is not possible, parents are urged to find after-school or mentoring programs to help. However, Root cautioned, this is not the whole story. He stated,

We have assumed that if cushioning social structures are in place, the impact of divorce is nullified or at least greatly diminished. But divorce is more than an issue of social capital or simple psychology (like self-esteem) . . . . Even if young people preserve their social capital and understand why their parents split-up and what the divorce means, it still leaves a mark that cannot be erased by social capital or correct knowledge. And these are marks that last well beyond the age of custody, for divorce is ontological. Divorce may be more fundamentally an issue of identity, which after-school programs and argument-free separations may not solve. Divorce then, is about much more than helping young people think rightly about themselves (“the divorce was not your fault”). We must address the ways divorce shakes us to our core, our ontology – how we most fundamentally are and act in the world. (p. 47)

Cathy’s resistance toward making any “waves” in her marriage was based on fears that speaking up could become a catalyst toward divorce. In fact, Cathy’s reluctance to make “waves” led to the very outcome she dreaded. It appeared that unresolved issues of ontological loss that were never resolved for Cathy at twenty-seven years old played a role in the ultimate ending of her own marriage.

Ontological security is described as,

A deep awareness of reliability, for it is based in being, not simply in knowing. If the child believes the family is secure (not perfect, but secure) and then she is told that the family as it is presently constituted will no longer exist, then the child is struck not at the level of social capital, but at the level of ontological security. Her world is no longer steady and dependable (Root, p. 47).

Through shock and sudden endings for children whose families had been their “communities” for all of their lives, it may be presumed that all of the children of participants in this study suffered losses of ontological security. These included Amy’s sons whose father told them they did not need to know where he was; all of Frank’s children, including the child who screamed from the basement upon hearing that her mother was leaving her father; Cathy’s children who saw both their mother and their father crying and were confused; Diane’s teenaged girls who each told their father they wanted no relationship with him and refused visitation; and Emma’s children, one of whom blamed herself for her father leaving and one of whom took off into the woods in the night to run away from home. All of these children appeared stuck, perhaps feeling inabilities to move forward without their earlier sense of *beings*.

*Research Question Three: What Contexts and Themes Help Families Deal With Sudden, Unexpected Divorce?*

As noted earlier, a constant theme of deconstruction and reconstruction took place during the research interviews. Participants who sounded lost and dazed, some nearly two years after they learned about their divorces, appeared stronger through verbalizing detailed, subjective meanings of specific experiences they had “survived.” Attig (2001) noted that, “In grieving we must relearn our very selves, including our characters, histories, and roles, and identities that we find in them. We must also relearn our self-confidence and self-esteem” (p. 40). It was apparent throughout all of the interviews that participants were working hard to reconnect to their essential selves.

Harvey (2002) focused on the importance of understanding subjective markers in a major loss. Harvey pointed out that others outside of the subjective experiences may not always see or understand the subjective perceptions of loss for those experiencing it. Harvey observed that the

disquiet of loss and trauma frequently become the source not only of anxiety and depression, but also hold within them the other side – of hope and generosity. Harvey believed it unlikely that everyone who experienced loss would automatically grow, but argued that the transforming key turning loss into growth was doing the “hard work of the mind and spirit that gives our losses meaning” (p. 9). He noted that we transcend our losses and develop resilience only when we actively learn and gain insight from our losses, or when we find meanings through them.

Although each of the participants was at a different stage in the process, each participant revealed the hard work engaged in for protracted periods of time. The “hard work” (Harvey, 2002, p. 9) and subjective meanings that participants experienced appeared to become the transforming keys that turned losses into growth for all of the participants. This is not to say that all of the participants “saw” their paths forward, but it is to say that all of the participants expressed some sense, belief, and hope that they would, after all, have a future. None of the participants expressed bitterness toward their former spouses while two of the participants expressed concern for them.

Five of the participants in this study were interviewed within six to nine months of their separations. Two had been separated for two years, and one participant had been separated for three years. All of their pains were still raw, their emotions still palpable. Seven of them were actively involved in doing the necessary work of grieving (Anderson, 2000; Hoge, 2002).

Attig (2001) noted that, in grieving, “We relearn all dimensions of our lives. As we do, we relearn ourselves. We reshape and restore integrity to our daily lives” (p. 38). “Relearning the world . . . is not a matter of taking in information or mastering ideas or theories. It is, rather, a matter of learning again *how to be and act in the world* without those we love by our sides” (p. 41).

Weiss (1982) explained that marriage becomes part of the essence of who we are and infiltrates the most remote portions of our lives. He stated that loss of the marriage may be experienced as “the loss of a limb” (p. 71). This analogy seemed to be expressed by one participant who experienced divorce as “amputation” from the dis-ease she felt living with “cancer on my soul” after discovering her husband’s infidelity.

For as broken as many of the participants were, one observation became clear: Their greatest source of strength and motivation to “live – while simultaneously dying” was their children. Each of the participants reported satisfying, loving relationships with each of their children. Values that the families had enjoyed as a whole prior to the divorce became templates and prototypes that helped lead participants forward. It was as if the values they were so strongly identified with before their shattered endings became the sustenance and energy that helped lead them forward to their stronger, more rooted selves. This included participants’ validating aspects of “specialness” for children each day, amplifying activities with children to have fun each week, and establishing markers to know if it is time to head to counseling.

All of the participants cited the role of family and friends as supports that were central to their lives during their traumatic divorce endings. Amy, Brad, Diane, Emma, Grace, and Heather all acknowledged meaningful encouragement and support they had received from their aging parents as well. Amy drew on the courage and strength that led her mother forward after the death of Amy’s father. Diane felt certain that God had allowed her eighty-three-year-old parents to live as long as they had to be there for her in her moment of great loss.

Strong faith and a sense of spirituality were cited by seven of the participants as key to helping them survive their many losses. Amy, Cathy, Diane, Emma, Frank, Grace, and Heather all felt strongly that they would not be where they were without God. Their faith was strong.

Their relationships with God appeared to be beacons, showing them the way home to newly established relationships with themselves and their children. These were all made clearer with newly understood meanings and restored feelings of integrity for what they had survived.

#### *Contributions to Research*

While the literature on divorce is extensive, little exists on specific aspects of sudden, unexpected divorce. Kelly (2005) reported that only in about twenty-five percent of divorces do both partners want the divorce. In light of that fact, questions prevail about what percentage of divorces may, in fact, be unilaterally imposed, with only one partner wanting the divorce. This study provided a valuable contribution to a limited body of research that exists on sudden, unexpected divorce.

The data gleaned from this study provided insights into divorces for spouses whose marriages ended in abandonment. These spouses were not part of a decision to divorce, yet their marriages ended in sudden, unexpected divorce by virtue of their partners' actions to unilaterally end their marital relationships. Similarly, this research provided glimpses into experiences for children whose lives were simultaneously disrupted in sudden, unexpected ways, changed forever by their parents' divorces.

Everstine and Everstine (1993) reported that psychological trauma occurs in the wake of an unexpected event that a person has experienced intimately and forcefully. From this perspective Everstine and Everstine viewed trauma as a response, a reaction, to a person's experience of an overwhelming event. Kazak (1992) observed that changes and stressors that affect families vary widely and that all change involves loss. Some changes are voluntary while others are not. While all change may be stressful, the underlying constructs of choice and control carry the potential to mediate distress. Other researchers (Booth & Amato, 1991; Simon

& Marcussen, 1999) noted that people whose marriages failed, who strongly believed that marriage is a lifelong commitment, had high levels of stress when their marriages ended.

The single, most important contribution this study added to the research points to new understandings of divorce-vis-à-vis traumatic reactions. It would appear, based on client interviews, that the literature on trauma, loss, bereavement, sudden endings, and meaning-making in the face of loss, provides more fertile areas to draw on in understanding complexities inherent in divorce that is traumatic than is the research on divorce. Sudden losses of spouses, losses of lives with spouses, and irrevocable changes that included losses of day-to-day routines and experiences stemming from sudden endings are not issues that, for the most part, are captured in the literature on divorce. Similarly, death and bereavement of spouses they believed they knew well – and shared their most intimate selves with - only to find they were married to “fakes” is not, for the most part, captured in the literature on divorce. Loss of images and identities for participants who no longer were “halves” of “wholes” in marriages they committed their lives to is not data that, for the most part, is covered in the literature on divorce. Years of coupling that instantly unraveled into uncoupling as participants made shocking discoveries are not, for the most part, captured in the literature on divorce. And doing the “hard work” of meaning-making connected with these losses – while simultaneously holding on to aspects of their present lives they prayed would lead them forward – are not data that, for the most part, are captured in the literature on divorce.

Becvar (2006) is one of few theorists who observed that, for those who face unexpected divorce “out of the blue,” another level of complexity may be added that is similar to the experience of sudden death. She stated,



As with a sudden death, the coping system of the rejected . . . is severely challenged. In addition to the various feelings associated with the loss the relationship, they must deal with shock, disbelief, and extreme disruption in all areas of their lives. In a moment, their world has shattered, often bringing about a sense of unreality as they find themselves projected into a totally new realm with no direction on how to proceed, indeed, often with no idea even of how or where to begin to move. (p. 198)

Another significant contribution this research adds to the literature on sudden, unexpected divorce points toward contextual understandings that families make of the event. Especially in the face of traumatic loss, this would appear to be central for a grieving and healing process. Although children's voices were not included directly in this study, their voices were heard clearly enough through participants to recognize strong reactions. Boss (2006) noted that losses that cannot be clarified become filled with ambiguity. She further observed that treatment that is neither systemic nor contextual, that is missing an understanding of the relevance of the loss, is missing a contextual understanding of the trauma. Children represent the most valuable resources that families have. Their absent voices all-too-often in family therapies after divorce serve to limit contextual understandings for families who are experiencing losses of divorce. Everstine and Everstine (1993) observed that, when trauma comes into the life of a child, developing connections between "internal process and external systems is disrupted. . . the very least of which will probably divert energy away from healthy development" (p. 113). This earlier observation, alongside of Root's (2010) more recent observation pertaining to loss of family representing the loss of *being* for children of divorce, compels a mental-health community to learn more about divorce contexts for children. Although their voices were few, the messages of many children of participants in this study were clear: They could not move forward.

Whatever their specific methods, those children failed to move forward into new relationships with the parent who left the family.

What *is* well-known in the divorce community is that the early phases of separation and divorce (i.e., the first one to two years) represent the most stressful time in the divorce process for families (Kaslow & Schwartz, 1987, 1997; Pam & Pearson, 1998). Therapy that becomes a holding space for support and healing in the face of tragic losses that shatter lives for those exposed to those losses would seem an appropriate goal. Therapy that would include as many voices in the family as possible that would create contexts and venues for narratives of healing would seem to be a humane, healthy, whole, and healing means toward achieving the grieving so necessary for those who find themselves in circumstances requiring those processes. Children being helped and facilitated to know their feelings and being helped to express them with the healing guidance of wise others, who would only have to put themselves into the child's shoes to begin to imagine the losses and the words that go along with those losses within children's contexts, would become gestures of caring and commitment to children whose bearings were lost in family communities that dissolved. Children would not know what "fell apart" for them, but caring professionals who are not protecting against the fragility of their own, and the child's pain might. All of this is conceivable, yet frequently is contrasted with the mechanistic rigors and heightened animosity that accompanies eighteen-month-no-fault-divorce-processes that "force" families to move into new roles and rules during the first two years after divorce, a time known for them to have the least gained new bearings, a time that is known in the clinical community to be the most vulnerable.

A different, but somewhat similar, issue pertains to behaviors that are viewed as parental alienation. Parental alienation refers to the refusal of children to visit one of the parents after

divorce. In many situations in which children refuse to visit one parent, the other parent files legal charges, "parental alienation charges," against the other parent. In Amy's case, her husband had filed these charges, then dropped them. One recent journal article directed attention to parental alienation (Hands & Warshak, 2011). The authors emphasized that not all children who are alienated from a parent are acting under the influence of the other parent. They noted that discord in the parent-child relationship can occur for a variety of reasons. They noted that one controversial aspect of parental alienation concerns the extent to which becoming alienated from one parent may be a normal and expected reaction to divorce versus an unhealthy aberration that needs attention. They stated, "Some critics believe that irrational alienation is a normal reaction to the divorce process" (p. 433). The authors further reported on the work of Bruch (2001) who believed that the concept of parental alienation is confused with common and predictable developmental responses to divorce. This would appear to be relevant information within the context of sudden, unexpected divorce in particular, but to all divorces in general. It would appear that, in the former context, children refusing to visit parents who abruptly left families in which there was no arguing or forewarning that major losses and marital abandonments were in the making, coupled with first-hand experiencing of traumatic reactions of parents who were abruptly left, would constitute normal versus abnormal reactions to divorce requiring court interventions. In fact, recognizing that courts *force* children into visits that they, for one reason or another, feel ill-equipped to participate in is highly distressing. Rather, there is a need for mental-health interventions that allow for contextual understandings of behavioral responses of children that court systems are ill-equipped to understand. Ironically, court personnel for the most part turn to experienced mental-health professionals for direction in these difficult situations, so underlying processes allowing these situations to exist at all, are unclear.

Marquardt (2006) noted that divorce divides the worlds that a child lives in. The child's job is to live between two worlds after their parent's divorce. Through divorce, parents assert that it is impossible for them to maintain one world for themselves. Children, unlike parents, are unable to escape realities of one world that is now unmade into two through divorce. The duty to make one world out of two is transferred from the parents to the children. It now becomes the child's job to do what the parents were unable to do, that is, bring two distinct worlds together. Thus, children are forced to live between two worlds. Although this researcher did not access voices of the children directly, the research reports did reveal strong feelings that children expressed through their parents' divorces. Their expressions are significant. These included strong expressions of protest from children who refused visitation with parents who left the family home. Their refusals to have anything to do with the other parent in all cases were so strong that children appeared unable to take whatever next steps would be required to move forward. As noted earlier, Root (2010) reported that children are strongly impacted by their parents' divorces, with the loss of family representing a loss of being for children. This research begs the question, as stated earlier, about forcing children to take next steps into new worlds without feelings of readiness and security after the disruptions of divorce. A contextual understanding for protests expressed by children in this research may also be understood through the earlier work of Janoff-Bulman (1992). Janoff-Bulman noted that, in situations in which a loved one has experienced traumatic reactions and shattered assumptions, loved ones closest to the traumatized person will be experiencing the direct effects of the trauma as well.

Through voices of children expressed through participants in the interviews, children's protests force us to consider alternative explanations for high numbers of children who refuse visitation with "other parents" after divorce. Through this research we are compelled to

intentionally consider both mental health and ethical issues related to children, families, and divorce. Specifically, all-too-often parents who are the ones left through divorces are held responsible for reactions of their children, effectively diminishing voices of children themselves, rather than working diligently to hear meanings concealed in children's reactions.

Through this research participants revealed and shared their most profound traumatic pains stemming from unexpected losses through the endings of their marriages. The *process* of sudden, unexpected endings was illuminated through this research for participants, and to a lesser degree, for their children.

This *process of divorce* included shocking moments in which participants learned that their partners planned to divorce them. Having no forewarning, advance notice, or input into any decision-making process, participants were forced to move from previously established patterns and routines that were once secure and life-enhancing, into sudden, unexpected endings that led relationships into terrifying, chaotic endings. By virtue of unprecedented events as well as traumatic reactions to them, participants were forced from predictable worlds into unpredictable worlds of loss and abandonment with no bridges across middles helping them connect or even understand the other sides of where they were headed. They were compelled to leave behind former experiences of security associated with connections to partners who were their best friends to grasping shocking discoveries they made leading them to see those same spouses as total strangers. Multiple losses moved participants from relationships in which they were once tightly coupled to becoming instantly uncoupled.

Feelings of being cheated, shocked, duped, outraged, powerless, and fearful replaced feelings of belonging and security that participants had formerly enjoyed in these same partnerships. This research revealed ontological losses, including pervasive feelings that

participants no longer knew who or how to “be” in the world without their other “halves,” which losses magnified missing pieces that would help them move toward being “wholes.” This research contributed to the literature by revealing processes that moved participants who were badly shaken at their most fundamental cores of identity through the “hard work” (Harvey, 2002, p. 9) to where they once again re-stabilized themselves and their children into newly reconstituted families. Having been pushed out of their roles as husbands, wives, lovers, friends, confidantes, and “idyllic” role models in the eyes of some of their communities, this research revealed the “hard work” participants engaged in to “make sense” out of seemingly senseless endings.

Feelings of devastation from abandonment that participants experienced were linked to a number of issues including the nature and duration of their relationships, the intensity of feelings they held about their relationships, and specific situations that were part of their break-ups. These specific situations included discoveries of duplicity and betrayal for five of the participants. Each of these sources of devastation from abandonment had previously been identified by Anderson (2000) as factors that contributed heavily to feelings of loss and devastation in circumstances related to sudden, unexpected divorce.

Research findings for five of the participants supported earlier observations about loss reported by Weiss (1998). That research identified three categories of loss, namely (1) losses that produce grief, which include losses of critically important relationships, (2) losses that damage self-esteem, foster self-doubt, and produce a sense of diminished social worth, and (3) losses that occur as a result of victimization, which include loss of self-respect through social humiliation. For all five of the participants who experienced these categories of loss, traumatic feelings were connected to discoveries of duplicity, betrayal, and cruelty that participants

experienced through the endings of their marriages to their spouses. Feelings that they no longer knew their partners permeated into entire households affecting the children as well. Feelings of humiliation were connected to knowing that their spouses observed them uninformed about duplicity in their marriages while participants worked hard to improve those relationships and become better partners. Feelings of victimization stemmed from knowing their actions had been assessed and observed by duplicitous partners who intentionally misled them for the spouses' own interests. Feelings of victimization arose from knowing spouses watched them and in the end abandoned them anyway.

This research supported findings made by Harvey's earlier (2002) research. That body of research highlighted the importance of understanding subjective markers in a major loss. He noted that others outside of the subjective experiences may not always see or understand subjective perceptions of those experiencing them. Each of the participants in this study survived the endings of their marriages by understanding subjective meaning-markers that were specific to their marriages. Meanings focused on stories, words used, timing of events, feelings, promises, beliefs, former losses and hardships, shared dreams, ways of caring for each other, and, ultimately, acts of betrayal and duplicity. Sifting through "before" and "after" stories comprised the "busy work" that led to subjective meaning-markers for the participants. One participant, whose primary investment in her marriage represented "accommodating" her husband more than attaining her own needs, poignantly revealed a subjective meaning-marker at the end of her interview as she stated, "God hasn't been able to work in my life because I've been a control freak. This is very humbling, to realize that I may have stood in God's way."

This study also revealed intense pain and further loss that one of the participants experienced through a counseling relationship that she believed failed to understand or support

subjective meanings that represented hope for her and her children. This participant believed that if her husband had continued receiving the same feedback he originally had been given, feedback that held him accountable for the ending of the marriage, he may have “come to his senses” and returned to the family fold. She noted that from the beginning of counseling her husband, and his sudden, unexpected ending of the marriage, was the reason the couple was in counseling. However, once she and her husband were no longer seen conjointly in marital or family counseling, the participant felt that loyalties shifted in therapy and that she was perceived as the problem vis-à-vis her son’s refusal for visitation. The participant felt cheated, unsupported, and abandoned in a counseling relationship that had previously been a source of support for her and her children. Additionally, the participant was blamed for her sons’ angry reactions to their father, including one son’s refusal to visit. She additionally had been threatened with court intervention for this son’s failure to visit. Feelings related to this loss of a counseling relationship led to heightened feelings of victimization for this participant. And, of all of the participants, she appeared least able to do the “hard work” of grieving (Harvey, 2002, p. 9).

Harvey (2002) further observed that the disquiet of loss and trauma frequently become the source not only of anxiety and depression, but also hold within them the other side of hope and generosity. This observation was clearly borne out in the current research. Participants in this study revealed strong tendencies to go beyond their many losses and feelings of devastation as they reached out to their children. Despite their pains and feelings of fragmentation – or perhaps more so because of it – participants demonstrated mindfulness for the plight of their children who had experienced sudden losses as well.



Significantly, two participants in this study expressed feelings of concern for their spouses in spite of a keen sense of abandonment and sudden endings. Divorce losses for these participants did not include the “hot poker wounds” of duplicity and victimization experienced by other participants. Although these participants were shattered by their losses that were precipitated through addictions, they did not incur additional levels of trauma that were imposed on spouses who discovered duplicity and betrayal, who in the end experienced their partners as “fake.” Without this additional level of trauma, these two participants seemed more able to access both the “good” and “bad” memories that have been identified elsewhere as necessary aspects of a grieving process that ultimately lead to resolution.

This research illuminated a *process* participants lived through as they died – while simultaneously living. The interviews provided close-up views of how participants gave up aspects of their former selves as they lived in their marriages while doing the “hard work” (Harvey, 2002, p. 9) to get to the other side of their new lives. Each of the participants told stories that revealed powerful processes that helped move them through the death of old relationships into new lives without their partners. Each of their stories revealed significant ways that parts of them died - while other parts of them tightly held on and lived. This process was clearly illuminated as participants faced those aspects of their selves that were formerly attached to their spouses, letting go of former identities connected to relationships they no longer recognized, in order to face and embrace newer, more integrated selves that evolved as a result of their losses. This process of walking two pathways simultaneously may be likened to a process that cancer patients invest in upon learning of their illnesses. On the one hand part of them is dying while on the other hand they are doing the hard work of living (Greenberg and Taft, 2012).

Holding two opposing realities at one time is no small feat for those who suddenly experience life traumas, who had no forewarning to prepare or bolster themselves, whether they be sudden, unexpected divorce, cancer, or other life-threatening experiences. Walking both pathways simultaneously brought forth new “normals” for participants who never dreamed their marital lives would end, leading to new beginnings for them and their children. It took strength for participants to know what to let go of, what to hold on to, and what to bring closer. Through a constant process of deconstruction and reconstruction, participants dug down deep and found their most subjective meanings. In this way, the experiences of participants closely resembled Attig’s (2001) description of moving in two different directions after a loss. He stated,

*In part, we return to aspects of our lives that are still viable. We find our ways back home among familiar things . . . We revive what ‘still works’ in our selves . . . We continue to draw nourishment and support from roots already in place. We discover and recover in them meanings that still sustain us.*

This research contributed awareness of newfound strengths that were revealed as by-products of painful experiences that participants’ stared down and came out the other side, stronger for the experience. The endings were not what they wanted or anticipated, but truth in their relationships, which they believed they had all along, was what they wanted. This was clearly evident at the end of Grace’s interview as she sobbed, “I don’t know if anybody else knows this yet, but the reason it hurts so bad is because I loved him so much. And my intention was completely different from what it ended up to be.” This was Grace’s reference to seeking greater honesty in the marital relationship only to have it “blow up” and end. Through divorces variously described as “drowning,” “amputation,” and “getting rid of cancer on my soul,” participants in this research contributed to the literature by allowing glimpses of what it was like

to die and come out the other side of life stronger than before. Learning what to hold on to, and what to let go of *was* the hard work of grieving described by Harvey (2002).

One aspect of earlier research on divorce that was not replicated in this study pertained to quality of parenting after divorce. Research studies indicated that divorced custodial parents, compared to married parents, invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children (Stone & McLanahan, 1991; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Simons & Associates, 1996; Thompson et al., 1992). By contrast, all participants in this study reported high levels of satisfaction in relationships with their children as well as nurturing parent-child relationships that were described as caring and loving. This appeared to reflect invested, concerned relationships that existed for both the parent and the children. Perhaps because of sudden endings, levels of caring, concern, and protectiveness became heightened for families who found themselves in survival mode, all the more acute because one spouse and parent abandoned the family community.

Engaging in the interview process as the method of data collection was valuable and rewarding to me as the researcher. Likewise, in all cases, the process appeared valuable to participants as well. An active process of the narrative provided opportunities for participants to focus on “meaning-making” in subjective ways that were important to them. Through their painful processes of deconstruction and reconstruction participants appeared to sift through remnant pieces of the ruins, reaching back and salvaging that part of their *beings* that was most valuable and viable for them to walk forward with. In this way, the interviews provided opportunities for them to discuss their heart-wrenching experiences and also served as

interventions that held potential for meaning-making and expanded levels of integration and growth.

### *Clinical Implications*

In addition to exploring parental experiences of sudden, unexpected divorce, this study was designed to expand the knowledge base for marriage and family therapists, family psychologists, and other professionals who work with divorcing families. The study led to insight into *processes* of divorce that represented a pile-up of losses for participants whose marriages ended suddenly and unexpectedly. While a number of researchers have examined families' experiences of divorce in general, few have focused specifically on sudden, unexpected divorce, thus limiting our understanding of specific stressors inherent in this type of divorce for families who experience them.

A number of authors (Anderson, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Neimeyer 2001) have encouraged a meaning-making approach to understanding grief. Neimeyer (2001) observed that a "relatively neglected interface of grief and trauma stems from my conviction, shared by a growing number of researchers and scholars, that the conjunction of the two poses special challenges for both theorists and practitioners" (p. 5). This research points to strong needs that exist for further studies to be undertaken that could help highlight important intersections that exist between grief and trauma.

Greater understanding of intersections between grief and trauma are particularly salient as divorce conjoins the legal system in divorce. Never before has the issue of residual anger between divorcing spouses been as predominant as it is in today's divorce courts. One must question what links, if any, exist between quickly-executed, no-fault divorce laws and unresolved grief for spouses, whose marriages ended in ways that led to trauma, thereby

precluding processes of grief. This may include divorces that ended in unilaterally imposed endings. What numbers of parents and children may be found in contempt of courts, funneled into categories of parental alienation, when in fact desperate voices of children wanting to be heard, their meanings understood, are currently outshouted by legal versus mental-health, systems?

Hoge (2002) observed that there is a discontinuity in behavior under extreme stress that has been noted in the research on stress that has not been recognized for the situation of divorce. Hoge reported on research including women who were abandoned shortly after childbirth. Her observation was that divorce was precipitated not so much by difficulties in the relationship as by a husband entering an internal state of profound, personal crisis. Hoge expressed her concern that there is an implicit assumption in the clinical world based on the presumption that partners who live intimately in each other's space must certainly sense each other's moods. Coming from that perspective, one would perceive that neither member of the couple should be too surprised by the divorce because both of them "should have seen it coming." When these couples enter therapy, Hoge observed, they are generally each encouraged to take mutual responsibility for the marriage's flaws. "The unstated value judgment is that if one partner was truly surprised, this reflects, at best, a large investment in denial and, at worst, a lack of psychological sophistication" (p. 2). Hoge noted that, although this may be true in some divorces, it does not take into account (in this case) "how pregnancy and childbirth can trigger deeply buried issues and fears, causing one partner to enter an unexpected personal crisis that explodes the marriage" (p. 3). Hoge's research touched closely on pertinent issues in the current research study, both findings in this study as well as clinical or value judgments that Hoge raised. Questions center on what personal crises were occurring, in the present or over time, in the lives of those who ended their marriages

through abandonment? Although the situation of divorce after childbirth appeared more acute in its suddenness, at some unknown point in time, spouses of participants in this study also appeared to have been victims of their own personal crises, also unnamed. Hoge's second point of withholding value judgments for clients who present for treatment feeling shocked by sudden endings of their marriages is equally valid. This is especially true in light of statistics revealing that only in about twenty-five percent of cases do both parties agree to the divorce (Kelly, 2005). Without these understandings, clinicians risk not only offending or alienating clients who are in these situations. They also risk not discovering deeply embedded levels of trauma clients bring to therapy as made explicit by voices in the current research.

In seeking to be present to those who are fragile, who have experienced sudden, unexpected endings of their marriages, a number of clinical issues may be considered. One addresses Boss' (2006) observation that losses that cannot be clarified become filled with ambiguity. In working with those who have experienced this type of divorce, or any divorce, marriage and family therapists or family psychologists should ask clients about their understandings of the relevance of the loss. What does it represent to them? What do they tell themselves about it? Marriage and family therapists want to explore meanings clients place on the events that include and assess levels of trauma, feelings of shame, victimization, humiliation, either imposed by former spouses, or perhaps self-imposed through feelings of self-recrimination, or even iatrogenic reactions to prior therapy that was not helpful. What were the couples' dreams and visions that are no longer? What did the client find out about the prior spouse that was horrifying, and, by extension, has affected one's own levels of integrity and self-esteem? What were their "before" and "after" stories, and where do they seem stuck? What is blocking their capacities to grieve? Who are the existing supports in the clients' lives and how

readily will they use them? What are the parts in client stories in which their roads seemed washed out, where they seem unable to cross over to the other side? What are the clients' relationships with children like, and how are children faring through the divorce? How readily does the client talk with the child(ren), and what do the children say? One strong contribution made through the current research that also holds clinical implications pertains to the value of the research questions, posed in ways that had meaning and relevance, that were situated within semistructured interviews, that brought forth narratives of healing for clients who sorely needed and deserved that. Therapists, perceptively listening for subjective meaning-markers, sitting with clients without trying to do anything with those markers, but understand and be present to massive unspoken losses, are pivotal people in the healing processes of clients.

Marriage and family therapists want to be watchful not to create contexts of divided loyalties. This could happen if the therapist has seen a couple conjointly, or even whole families together, and ultimately ends up seeing only one of the parties. Based on an abandoning partner's need to recover from narcissistic injuries or wounds exposed through the divorce process, picking up individual treatment with this partner may be fraught with difficulties. Goals of treatment must be explicitly stated. Additionally, if the original therapy included the spouse who was abandoned, in order to prevent any appearances of divided loyalties, it may be preferable and in everyone's best interests for the client to find a different therapist.

"Grief is a family affair. Family members struggle to make sense of their loss by talking to each other. In doing so, they attach meaning to their losses" (Nadeau, 2001, p. 95). Never was this clearer through the current research than when Amy and her sons, with hindsight, put their heads together to determine when they individually and collectively began seeing changes in the family's husband and father. Similarly, conversations that Frank had with all of his

children, in particular with his little girl who believed they would no longer be a family, evidenced the same dynamic of family meaning-making. However, as Nadeau noted, "We know precious little about how families construct meanings. Most of what we do know is from an individual perspective, but individuals do not grieve in a vacuum. They make sense of their experiences by interacting with others" (p. 96). Based on the pivotal role that meaning-making experiences represented for all of the participants in this study, a strong need exists for further research on family-meaning-making perspectives. Research from that perspective would seem especially important coming from family systems researchers. Working from built-in windows of opportunities to view systemic functioning in families, family-meaning-making would be a further extension to systemic work with families than currently exists.

One way that marriage and family therapists can engage in this work is to encourage parents to involve their children in family counseling if there is a divorce. Boss (2006) highlighted the need to understand the perceptions and meanings a family places on an event. She emphasized that treatment that is neither systemic nor contextual, that is individually based, but without understanding the relevance of the loss, is missing a contextual understanding of the trauma. For the most part, parents who are themselves traumatized might understandably have a difficult time talking to their children about sad events, especially one as central as the break-up of their families. Any ability that parents can be helped to have in the process of forming a vocabulary to talk with their children about the divorce helps diminish feelings of loss of family as loss of self (Root, 2012). In a way that fosters a psychoeducational model, therapists can be guides in helping parents and children have difficult conversations. Several researchers noted that the most poignant moment in the divorce, as reported by children, was the actual separation when one parent actually left the home (Dreman, 1991). Ahrons (1994) and Wallerstein (1983)



each described the physical leaving of one parent as a core feature of emotional divorce. It is unclear what children may tell themselves about these defining moments, but it is within the purview of family therapy to help parents enter into those sacred spaces with their children. The alternative is that children of all ages face feelings that are terrifying, alone. Diane's daughter refused to "walk" at her graduation because she did not want the discomfort and embarrassment associated with facing her many feelings.

Boss (2006) identified a central issue when it comes to dealing with loss. She stated, Loss is difficult to talk about because it reminds family members as well as trained professionals that something could not be fixed or cured. Most people cannot tolerate for long being in a situation that is outside of their control . . . To many in cultures that value mastery, the goal is to win, not lose . . . Grieving is acceptable, we should get over it and get back to work. (p. 4)

Working with grief may not ever be easy. But clinical implications in the present study revealed dividends for clients who engaged in the "hard work" (Harvey, 2002, p. 9) of grieving. Having lost lives with spouses that each of them believed would last forever, meaning-making and senses of subjective understandings became their newfound guiding lights going forward.

With a clearer understanding of the pile-up of losses incurred for families through sudden, unexpected divorce, there is a compelling need to understand much more about exactly how many divorces fall into this category as they move through the court system each year. Many mental-health professionals are partnered with the legal system through the provision of services including custody evaluations, parenting-coordination services, co-parenting classes, and others. However, this research highlights the need for theorists and researchers to partner

with families of divorce in meaningful ways to help decipher and strengthen weakened voices as they move through the mental-health and the legal systems.

A strong need surfaced through this research to understand more about spouses who leave marriages in sudden, unexpected endings. Two questions come to mind: What is the characterological make-up, if decipherable, of those spouses who abandoned their partners? And, what would a trajectory of life experiences for those spouses who abandoned the participants look like after the divorce?

This research pointed to a need to understand much more about the children of divorce. How many of their experiences are colored by A) traumatic reactions of the abandoned parent; B) their own experiences of terror and fear upon the abandonment of their other parent, a pivotal member of their family community; C) what are the impacts for children whose voices are silenced as they are forced to move forward in divorces they feel ill-equipped to move forward in; D) for children who are compelled by courts and other parents to move forward before feeling prepared, how are trust and attachment issues impacted in present and future relationships; E) is sudden, unexpected divorce more traumatic for children whose parents did not engage in arguing versus those who did; and F) what roles can mental-health professionals play in helping shape public policies and laws in ways that would be more mental-health and child friendly as they pertain to divorce?

With this research completed, a further need strongly exists to understand more about the exact process of “dying – while living.” What important data do participants in this or any other studies on the topic of sudden, unexpected events have to offer regarding processes involved in “holding two opposing realities” and “walking two pathways simultaneously at the same time”? (Greenberg and Taft, 2012). If grieving our losses and relinquishing them are central to a

healing process, this dynamic, along with attributes of those who manifest strengths to engage in it, are essential to learn more about.

Similarly, one cannot help but be struck by powerful elements contained in a dying but rebirthing process. Frank initially initiated steps with his wife to turn his marriage from something ordinary into something extraordinary. To his amazement, efforts to find greater truth and integrity led to the ending of his marriage. Frank agonized upon learning this. In vivid detail, his voice and words revealed feelings describing how “the bottom fell out.” He got on his knees and begged, “Can’t we please work this out?” Anything would have been preferable for Frank than losing what he had! And, yet, within that same heartbeat and upon learning there was no hope, Frank embraced those aspects of his life that he had engaged in more deeply as steps to strengthen the marriage and appeared to experience feelings of greater integrity within himself as a result. In a similar way Grace did the same. At a point in the marriage in which Grace wanted greater closeness, she approached her husband to clarify behaviors that led Grace to feel she had “cancer on my soul.” Instead, Grace’s good intentions “blew up”. Her marriage ended. There was an absence of clarity for *how* Grace would go forward as she participated in the interview. But notably, Grace never expressed doubts that she would go forward.

Based on those examples, a question for future research pivots around these issues: What was it about learning dreaded truths and surviving their traumas that in one heartbeat both weakened and strengthened participants at the same time? What was it about facing bitter realities that their relationships had died and recognizing they were invested in “fakes” (duplicity) that propelled participants to go forward? Is this dynamic reflective of well-known therapies involved in cancer care that teach “We can’t be grateful for what we have until we grieve what we have lost?” (Greenberg and Taft, 2012). Stated differently, not until participants

recognized entanglements they shared with spouses they no longer knew or identified with, were they able to feel relief, get as far away as possible, and take what little they solidly knew about themselves into higher, more self-defined grounds? Was this a quality-versus-quantity issue for Emma whose whole family looked forward with anticipation to a new house and new rooms, now replaced with intentionally loving outreaches of “specialness” in light of their wounds? Having faced the worst, each of them revealed a self that was stronger and clearer than ever about the values they stood for. “It’s not what I intended,” Grace cried, “but, if this loss is what it took to get rid of cancer on my soul, I’m better off.”

#### *Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research*

There were several limitations of this study that will be discussed within this section. The first limitation pertains to the recruitment methods and limited focus on the population being studied. Although qualitative data are valuable in that they allow for richer descriptions of participants’ experiences, the results are often generalizable only to individuals who fit similar descriptions to those included in the study. The parents included in this study were recruited from a Northeast U. S. suburban area. Although outreach was made to therapists and attorneys in the area, all but one of the participants was recruited from faith-based communities. Although this approach was useful in that it helped identify participants in a less time-consuming way, there are a number of disadvantages. The most important disadvantage is that this study did not include a widely varied population of parents who experienced sudden, unexpected divorce who come from communities other than faith-based. Future researchers should expand the geographic locations and social involvements in which participants are chosen in efforts to gain greater ranges of participant experiences.

A second limitation concerns the fact that only parents who were left in sudden, unexpected divorce were included in the research study. In light of existing research focused on the plights of children who have no voices in their parents' divorces, inclusion of children in future studies would be important. Future research that included voices of the children would yield valuable data about specific experiences of divorce for children. This would be more consistent in learning about experiences for families.

A third limitation concerns the fact that children's relationships with their fathers after their divorces were not included in the study. Understanding more from children's perspectives about what promotes, or inhibits, steps toward changed relationships with their fathers after divorce would also be more consistent in learning about experiences for families. Future research to explore reactions to divorce for children along developmental continua would be helpful as well.

Prior to conducting any interview, I engaged in a process of bracketing in an effort to set aside preconceived notions, beliefs, and knowledge of sudden, unexpected divorce. Striving for accuracy of perception and understanding was maintained through this process. Additionally, field notes, in which I wrote about my experiences of the participants and the research process, were utilized to remain aware of reactions and feelings that emerged during the course of the study.

In summary, participants in this study contributed meanings and sense that they made of their sudden, unexpected divorces. By illuminating their processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, and by sharing their poignant, close-up experiences of doing the "hard work" (Harvey, 2002, p.9) of letting go of marriages they were invested in with spouses they believed

would be their partners forever, participants made significant contributions to the clinical research on sudden, unexpected divorce.

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Informed Consent Form

Appendix A

Dear Potential Participant:

Researcher's affiliation: Geraldine Kerr is a doctoral student in the Ph.D. in Marriage and Family program in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. She is searching for participants in the research she is conducting for her doctoral dissertation.

Purpose of the Research: The purpose of conducting this study is to gain insight into and understanding about the experience of sudden, unexpected divorce. In order to do this, the researcher will conduct individual interviews with parents who have experienced this type of divorce.

Duration of subject's participation: The researcher will interview each participant for approximately two hours. A parent is to make arrangements so that children are not present for the interview. Several weeks after the interview, the participant will be asked to review a transcript of the interview for accuracy.

Voluntary participation: Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Therefore, each participant will retain the freedom to withdraw from participating at any point without penalty.

Confidentiality: The researcher will safeguard every participant's confidentiality. Your name will not be used in analyzing or reporting research results during or after the study. Although identifying background data will be collected, all efforts will be made to protect that no links are made between your identity and the information that you provide. The researcher will herself transcribe the audio-taped interview. Research data will be stored on a disc that will be kept in a locked, secure, on-site location. The digital recording will be retained for three years after which it will be destroyed. The results of this study may be published and presented to different audiences at the researcher's discretion.

Requirements: Participation will be limited to parents who have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce and who have children living at home. The divorce will have occurred between six months and three years ago. Children are not permitted to attend or participate in the research interview.

Risks or discomforts: Because this study involves reflecting upon lived experiences, it is possible that a participant may experience some discomfort before, during, and/or after the interview process.

Steps to take in case of risks or discomforts: If you do experience stress or as a result of the interview, you may speak to a relative, friend, religious minister, and/or seek professional help. If it is during the interview process, the participant should inform the researcher in order to be referred for help from an appropriate source. Alternatively, the participant may seek mental health services from the NJ Psychological Association (1-800-281-6572), the National Association of Social Workers NJ Chapter (1-800-932-0004) and/or from the NJ American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists (908) 301-1053, or a local mental-health agency or private-practice professional.

Benefits: No participant shall receive any monetary or material benefits for participation in this study. However, she or he may find the interview helpful in clarifying his or her personal meanings of sudden, unexpected divorce. Upon request a summary of group findings can be provided by contacting the researcher.

Further contacts: If you have a need to clarify questions or require additional information regarding this letter or the researcher, please contact:

Geraldine Kerr, Ed.S. (Researcher)  
254 Mountain Avenue, Suite 4A  
Hackettstown, NJ 07840  
(908) 813-8232

Robert Massey, Ph.D. (Dissertation Advisor)  
Seton Hall University  
Dept. of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy  
400 South Orange Avenue  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
(973) 761-9451

Mary F. Ruzicka, Ph.D. (Director, IRB)  
Seton Hall University  
Office of Institutional Review Board  
400 South Orange Ave.  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
(973) 313-6314

Note: Taking into account all of the above considerations, a prospective participant who voluntarily decides to participate in this study, should complete the required information in the following spaces on this form for informed consent. The researcher will give a

copy of this signed and dated consent form to the prospective participant before the beginning of the first interview.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix B

### Letter Sample to Potential Referral Sources

254 Mountain Ave., Suite 4A

Hackettstown, NJ 07840

Date:

Name of Clergy/Attorney/School/Chair, Professional Organization Name:

Address of Church/Attorney/School/Chair of Professional Organization:

My name is Geraldine Kerr. I am a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Program in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. I am searching for participants for the research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation on sudden, unexpected divorce.

*Purpose of the research*

The purpose of conducting this study is to identify the meanings parents make of sudden, unexpected divorce. In order to do this, I will interview parents who have experienced this type of divorce.

*Request*

Based on these considerations, I ask for your permission allowing me to distribute flyers in your church/office/meeting as one of the ways to recruit participants. The attached flyer is the one I would like to distribute if you are willing. Secondly, I would like to ask that your reply for this permission be given in writing on the official letterhead of your church/office/school/organization. I will then show your written permission to the Director of the Institutional Review Board for research involving human subjects at Seton Hall University as a means of documenting that I have been authorized to recruit participants at your specific site.

Thank you for your consideration.

*Further contacts*

If you have any questions or need additional information regarding this letter or the researcher, you may contact:

Geraldine Kerr, Ed.S, (Researcher)  
254 Mountain Ave., Suite 4A  
Hackettstown, NJ 07840  
(908)813-8232

Robert Massey, Ph.D. (Dissertation Advisor)  
Seton Hall University  
Dept. of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy  
400 South Orange Avenue  
South Orange, NJ 07079  
(973) 761-9451

Appendix C

Flyer to be Distributed to People in Churches/Attorney offices/Professional meetings  
Schools/Newspaper Ads/Single Parent Groups

VOLUNTEER PARENTS NEEDED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY ON  
SUDDEN, UNEXPECTED DIVORCE

The **Researcher** is Geraldine Kerr, Ed.S. I am a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Program in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. I am searching for participants for the research for my doctoral dissertation.

**The Purpose of the study** is to gain insight and understanding about the meanings parents make of an experience of sudden, unexpected divorce.

**Participation** will involve two hour in-person research interview on one day and a review of the transcribed interview several weeks later.

**Requirements:** Participants will be limited to parents who have children living in the family home. Participants will have experienced sudden, unexpected divorce within six months to three years ago and will have not remarried. Children are not permitted to attend or participate in the research interview.

**Participation entirely voluntary:** Every participant will retain the freedom to withdraw from participating in the study at any point in the interview without penalty.

**Confidentiality:** No participant's name will be used in analyzing or reporting the results during or after the study. The material gathered from each interview will be kept confidentially in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office.

**Contact person:** If you are interested in participating in this study, or you know someone who might be interested, or require additional information about this study, you may contact:

Geraldine Kerr, Ed.S. (Researcher)  
254 Mountain Ave., Suite 4A  
Hackettstown, NJ 07840  
(908)813-8232

Upon request a summary of group findings can be provided by contacting the researcher.

**What next:** You are invited to contact Geraldine Kerr at your earliest convenience or pass the flyer to someone you know who experienced a sudden, unexpected ending to their marriage who might volunteer. Your help may contribute to a better understanding of what custodial parents experience in this type of sudden divorce.

Appendix D  
Oral Presentation in Churches

Good morning/evening:

I would like to thank Pastor \_\_\_\_\_ (name) for allowing me these few minutes to present my request to you.

My name is Geraldine Kerr. I am a doctoral student in the Marriage and Family Program in the Department of Professional Psychology and Family Therapy at Seton Hall University, South Orange, NJ. I am recruiting participants for the research I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation.

I am seeking to understand what people go through when they experience a sudden, unexpected ending of a marriage. Specifically, I am wanting to learn what that experience is like for parents who are suddenly faced with the ending of a marriage. Hopefully, the information gained from doing research on this specific type of divorce will be helpful to others who may face this type of divorce in the future.

The help that I would like to receive is from those of you who may have experienced this type of divorce yourself or from someone you know with this experience. If you or someone you know has experienced sudden, unexpected divorce within the past six months to three years, who has children living in the home, and who has not remarried, I would like to distribute a flyer to you that describes the study more fully. After Mass, I will remain in the Gathering Room for a while to answer any questions you may have. The flyer contains my contact address and telephone number. After being contacted, I will discuss in detail with the person how to proceed.

Thank you for your time, attention, and help.

Appendix E  
Interview Research Questions



## Question # 1:

What sense do single parents make of divorce that was unexpected?

- a. What sense do you make of the way the marriage ended?
- b. What do you tell yourself about the sudden, unexpected way that your spouse ended the marriage?
- c. How sense do you have of yourself, having been unprepared for a sudden, unexpected divorce?
- d. Did you experience your parent's divorcing in your family of origin? If so, how?

## Question # 2:

What effects has the divorce had on families of sudden, unexpected divorce?

- a. What effects has the sudden divorce had on you?
- b. What effect has the sudden divorce had on the children?
- c. What did you or your ex-spouse say to the children about the divorce?
- d. What were differences handled between the two of you?
- e. What was your family life like before the divorce?
- f. What is your family life like since the divorce?

Default questions if information does not surface initially:

2e and f: Explore 1) routines, 2) time for and types of discussions, 3) time spent, Available for children, similar or different.

## Question # 3:

What contexts and themes help families to deal with sudden, unexpected divorce?

- a. Can you turn to people in your life you used to rely on for support?
- b. What can you tell me about how you and your children are moving through the divorce?
- c. What have you found to be most helpful as you move through the divorce?

- d. What can you tell me about your children's perceptions of the divorce?
- e. What can you tell me about your ability to support your children through the divorce?