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DIVORCE AFTER LONG-TERM MARRIAGE:  
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

A  
DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of  
St. Mary's University in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
in  
COUNSELOR EDUCATION AND SUPERVISION

Melanie M. Somerville, MA, LPC-S

San Antonio, Texas

2017

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DIVORCE AFTER LONG-TERM MARRIAGE:  
A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Brobdingnagian task of completing a dissertation pales in comparison to raising children. Therefore, I dedicate the effort, discipline, and time spent completing this research to my daughters, Madison and Hannah. They represent the best of my heart and soul, and are constant sources of infinite love, laughter, encouragement, and inspiration. This is for you, my darlings.

I would also like to honor their father and my former husband, Dr. Judson Somerville. Without his early encouragement, I would never have begun my journey as a counselor. His endorsement of higher education and belief in the power of counseling spurred me to resume my education twenty years after obtaining my undergraduate degree. Thank you, Judd.

To my parents, Judy Wickham and Carroll Merlick, thank you for your unceasing encouragement, affection, love and support. You always told me I could do anything I wanted. For much of my life, I took that statement for granted, but held onto this aphorism time and again while working on this project. I love you so much.

My four siblings, Alecia, Jennifer, Christopher and Jerry, and their spouses and children have all shown, in many ways, their love and kindness throughout my dissertation journey. I was absent for many family gatherings in the service of this project and I never heard a word of criticism or disapproval. Your love is with me always, and I thank you for support, seen and unseen. I send my love to you all.

To my chair, Dr. Dana Comstock-Benzick, what a journey we have been on! I am ever appreciative of your guidance and teaching. I am a better writer, scholar, and researcher having been your student these five years! Namaste.

To Dr. Gilberto Salinas, remember the conversation we had in your office almost ten years ago? I remember as though it were yesterday. You said, “You should get your PhD and develop new theory.” And I said, “No way! I am done with graduate school!” Not a year later, I was back in your office, asking whom to call about a doctoral program. I cannot thank you enough for opening the door, just a crack, to my curiosity. No lie, there were days I cursed you, and myself, for taking on this task. Truly, you saw something in me that I could not. Mil gracias, amigo.

To Dr. Ray Wooten, while earning my Master’s degree in Laredo, I heard your name venerated by your former student, Dr. Salinas. When I took your classes at St. Mary’s, I understood. Thank you for all the wisdom you imparted to me, and guidance you provided during the doctoral program. Thank you for agreeing to serve on my committee.

I extend the penultimate thanks and dedication to my partner and love of my life, Scott Ortkiese. In everything he is enthusiastic and present. He cajoled me from my doubts, and made me laugh. He cooked dinner, cleaned up, gave me time and space. I cannot have been easy to live with these past few months. My heart is full as I type these words, because you have made it all bearable. Thank you, darling.

Many, many more family, friends and dogs contributed, in countless ways, to the completion of my dissertation. For the French bread, tennis balls, insights, dog walks, lunchtime chats, Gestalt gleanings, running companionship, heart-to-heart talks, and overall good times, thank you and love to, Don, Kevin, Matt, Denise, Jen, Avery, Doug, Christa, Karen, Mike, Jan, Michael, James, Vicki, Peter, Driftwood crew, Monique, John, Carol, Alexa, Steph, Elizabeth, David, Debbie, Eliza, David, Felicite, Allison, Emily,

Sara, Renee, Masaru, Preston, Sy, Wegman, Gina, Rosie, Chris, Jenny, Elizabeth, Yvette,  
Quincy, Ramon, Kim, Francis, Hal, David, Linda, Tammy, Tina, Selina, Mike, Raul,  
David, Julian, Trine, Maribel, Lily and Fiona!

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## ABSTRACT

### DIVORCE AFTER LONG-TERM MARRIAGE: A CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY STUDY

Melanie M. Somerville, MA, LPC

St. Mary's University, May 2017

Dissertation Adviser: Dana Comstock-Benzick, Ph.D.

Divorce is an enduring feature of American culture. As much as Americans value marriage, they also assert the right to divorce. The literature makes clear that modern couples expect their spouses to meet their individual personal goals of self-fulfillment and growth. Furthermore, divorce recovery is often portrayed as an individualistic endeavor. Changing attitudes about marriage and divorce have contributed to the current rate of divorce among midlife individuals, who have the highest divorce rates of any age group. Many individuals who divorce at midlife have been married for 20 or more years. Divorce is most often experienced as a disruption in relationship. This study sought to generate a theory about women's successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE PROBLEM AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY**

Divorce is an accepted facet of American life (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005). Although Americans value the institution of marriage and expect to marry, they also insist upon the right to divorce (Cherlin, 2009). Finkel, Hui, Carswell, and Larson (2014) suggested that individuals in the United States have come to expect even more from their marriages. Instead of couples needing each other to survive, they now expect their marriages to fulfill higher order needs such as self-fulfillment and personal growth (Cherlin, 2009). Some social scientists have argued that when couples do not obtain self-fulfillment and personal growth in their respective marriages, divorce has become a socially acceptable option (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Finkel et al., 2014; Whitehead, 1996).

Divorce is a major life event and is often experienced as painful and distressing (Demo & Fine, 2010, p. 49; Lloyd, Sailor, & Carney, 2014; Sakranda, 2008). Lloyd et al. (2014) noted, “Divorced individuals express a general feeling of being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do. Some psychological and emotional responses include feelings of guilt, insecurity, fear, anger, hatred, rejection, a sense of emptiness, self-pity, and a loss of self-confidence” (p. 441). Sakranda (2005) emphasized that in addition to intense feelings, divorce is a “transition process that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (p. 226).

Divorce marks the end of a relationship. Relational-cultural theory (RCT) emphasizes that mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships are essential components of healthy human development (Miller, 1976/1986). The centrality of



relationships in women's lives has been illuminated by many scholars and supports a careful examination of the impact of divorce on their psychological well-being (Jordan, Kaplan, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Miller, 1976/1986; Sakraida, 2005). Van Schalkwyk (2005) proposed that divorced women "face dominant discourses that elicit intense internal discomfort, conflict, and loss of socially constructed self" (p. 90). Loss of self may lead some women to believe they are not "worthy relational beings" (p. 90).

Midlife women who divorce after long-term marriages face challenges different from women who divorce at younger ages (Green, 2013). In addition to some negative emotions associated with divorce noted by Sakraida (2005), Gregson and Ceynar (2009) emphasized that the transition through divorce for midlife women has also been described as being transformative, regenerative, and freeing (Gregson & Ceynar).

The time period of midlife for women has often been portrayed by scholars and the mass media as a time of "barrenness, asexuality, loss, and deterioration" (Degges-White & Myers, 2006, p. 134; Kilbourne, 1999). In contrast, Degges-White and Myers (2006) found that midlife women in their study experienced a wide range of transitions in midlife, including transitions "that differ markedly from traditional societal expectations and for which there are few role models" (p 134). Gregson and Ceynar (2009) noted women after divorce reported internal and external shifts that contributed to positive post-divorce identities. The purpose of this study was to explore the relational processes that facilitated the successful recovery of midlife women who divorced after long-term marriage. These processes are presented and examined through the lens of Relational-cultural theory.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Divorce is a transition that encompasses many changes: notably, relational shifts, financial status, and psychological wellbeing (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Sakraida, 2005). Brown and Lin (2012) reported that women in midlife are more likely to divorce as compared to women in other age groups. Sakraida (2005) stated that a “greater awareness of the divorce transition and its impact on lives empowers midlife women by explicating times of grief and celebrations” (p. 245). The impact of divorce after long-term marriage on midlife women and the manner in which they navigate, repair, reconstruct, and negotiate the resultant disconnections and relational ruptures is understudied (Brown & Lin, 2012; Comstock-Benzick, 2013).

In spite of there being a plethora of knowledge on the centrality of relationships in women’s lives (Jordan et al., 1991; Miller, 1976/1986), the divorce adjustment literature is predominately focused on *individual* change, such as in one’s “self-perception” and “sense of identity” as well as one’s individual experiences of life satisfaction and wellness (Degges-White & Myers, 2006; Green, 2013; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). The complex dynamics of divorce after a long-term marriage, coupled with a cultural emphasis on expressive individualism and marriage as a source of personal satisfaction (Cherlin, 2009), warranted an examination of midlife women’s experiences through the lens of Relational cultural theory, such that appropriate therapeutic interventions can be created and applied.

## **Research Question**

What are the experiences and relational processes that facilitate the successful adjustment of women in midlife who divorce after long-term marriage?

### **Justification for the Study**

Researchers Heatherington and Kelly (2002) conducted perhaps the most comprehensive study on divorce recovery. Their research combined 30 years of detailed investigation into almost 1,400 families and more than 2,500 children. Among the multitude of findings, the investigators identified patterns of divorce adjustment in adults. According to Heatherington and Kelly, divorced men and women can be labeled as to the success of their adjustment by falling into one of five categories: enhanced, competent loners, good enoughs, seekers, libertines, and the defeated. These categorical labels, which unfolded after extensive data collection and analysis, suggested divorce recovery is linear and static. However, Heatherington and Kelly failed to distinguish or identify any sociopolitical factors, including gender, that facilitated their subjects' placement into any particular label.

In contrast, Demo and Fine (2010) made the point that one's progress towards adjustment following divorce "is not necessarily linear and that periods of growth and resilience are intertwined with, and sometimes concurrent with, periods of turmoil and difficulty" (p. 5). Demo and Fine also noted that "there is no single truth characterizing the social world and that there are many and varied truths depending on a host of contextual and cultural variables" (p. 46). Furthermore, Demo and Fine emphasized,

In the divorce literature there has been a growing recognition that there are both his and her divorces in the sense that each partner has a unique experience related to the divorce and each constructs a story or narrative describing his or her understanding of the events that occurred during the relationship, as it was dissolving, and after dissolution. (p. 46)

The current study sought to generate a new theory about the successful adjustment of midlife women who divorced after a long-term marriage.

Midlife divorce has become increasingly common in the United States (Brown & Lin, 2012; Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Montenegro, 2004). Most divorces that occur at midlife are from marriages of 20 years or more (Montenegro, 2004). Brown and Lin (2012) stated divorce research has focused more on younger adults and virtually ignored adults who divorce at midlife. There is a need for more investigation into the lives of women who divorce after a long-term marriage (Dare, 2011; Perrig-Chiello, Hutchison, & Morselli, 2015). A theory of the relational processes does not currently exist that facilitates the successful recovery of women who divorce in midlife after long-term marriages, nor has the RCT perspective been used to examine midlife divorce adjustment. Furthermore, no current research exists which describes the impact of divorce on women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. This research sought out a culturally diverse group of women as study participants.

Generating a theory of the processes related to midlife women's successful divorce adjustment may enable counselors and mental health professionals to provide effective interventions. Counselors will be able to better educate these women about the post-divorce adjustment period. Understanding midlife women's divorce experiences after a long-term marriage may indeed reserve their place "within the literature, a place that tells their stories (Makidon, 2013, p. 338)

### **Limitations**

This research study has limitations inherent to the methodology being utilized. Grounded theory is intended to generate knowledge about phenomena. As such, the data

are not numbers, as in quantitative research, but are the actions and processes contained in the words of research participants. The data analysis process is concentrated upon initial and focused coding, theoretical memos, theoretical sampling, and constructing categories, all in the service of generating the emergent theory.

As a woman who divorced after a long-term marriage, the researcher is aware of the biases and attitudes she brings about divorce to the research process. Constructivist grounded theory is a pragmatic and relativist approach. Intrinsic to the theory is an acknowledgment that the research experience is co-created by the researcher and her participants (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 12-13). It is impossible for a qualitative researcher to completely separate him/herself from past experiences. Charmaz (2014) argued that early proponents of grounded theory, who insisted researchers rid themselves of their preconceptions, were, in fact, inviting preconception (p. 160). Rather, having an awareness of preconceptions, according to Charmaz, allows researchers to go forward with sensitivity. Engaging in theoretical memoing and reflexivity are tools researchers use to ensure the rigor of their research.

Further limitations of this study include an insufficiently diversified participant group. Although the researcher attempted to recruit women of color for this study, only one minority woman responding to the online questionnaire met the qualifications for inclusion. Nine of the 10 participants were white females, and one was Mexican-American. Furthermore, participants were educated, high functioning, and verbally adept at describing their experiences and relationships. All participants had access to resources, including financial, emotional, and personal resources. The positive attributes of

education, intelligence, and resources signifies that potential participants without those resources were not readily available for this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**American** is a term scholars use interchangeably to indicate individuals residing in the United States, and those who immigrated to the United States. The term does not necessarily refer to individuals native to North America (Cott, 2000; Cherlin, 2009).

**American family** refers to a married heterosexual couple and their children (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 2008). “The family is a place where one is unconditionally accepted, something almost unknown in the worlds of business and politics (Bellah et al., p. 87).

**Companionate marriage** is a model of marriage seen in the United States from approximately 1850 to 1965, in which spouses provided emotional support for each other, but also were relegated to specific gender roles, i.e., husbands are breadwinners, wives provide nurturance and emotional comfort to the family (Cherlin, 2009; Finkel et al., 2014).

**Crude divorce rate** is defined as “the number of divorces per 1,000 people in the population” (Amato, 2010, p. 650).

**Divorce** is defined as the legal termination of marriage and the transition period afterwards (Sakraida, 2005).

**Expressive individualism** is defined as “A view of life that emphasizes the development of one’s sense of self, the pursuit of emotional satisfaction, and the expression of one’s feelings” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 29).

**Growth-fostering relationships.** A fundamental and complex process of active participation in the development and growth of other people and the relationship that results in mutual development (Miller & Stiver, 1997), such a relationship results in growth for both (or more) people.

**Individualized marriage** is a model of marriage that emerged in the mid-1960s and continues today. Individualized marriage emerged as spouses, namely women, were granted more rights within the marriage (Cherlin, 2009). Furthermore, spouses are oriented toward “helping spouses meet their personal growth and autonomy needs” (Finkel et al., 2014, p. 2).

**Initiator** is defined as the person in a married couple who makes the first move toward the legal termination of the marriage. Usually this is done by making an announcement of intent to the other spouse or by contracting a lawyer to enact formal divorce proceedings (Green, 2013).

**Institutional marriage** is defined as a model of marriage that existed in the United States from the late eighteenth century marriage until about 1850 and was “primarily oriented toward helping spouses meet their economic, political and pragmatic goals” (Finkel et al., 2014, p. 2).

**Long-term marriage** is defined as a first marriage of twenty years or more (Fennell, 1993; Field & Weishaus, 1984).

**Midlife** is defined broadly as the years between 30 and 70, with 40 to 60 encompassing the fundamental years of midlife (Degges-White & Myers, 2009; see also Freund & Ritter, 2009).

**Mutual empathy.** Surrey (1991b) described mutual empathy as a creative process “in which openness to change allows something new to happen, building on the different contributions of each person” (p. 43). Furthermore,

It is not so much a matter of reciprocity . . . but rather a quality of relationality (*sic*), a movement or dynamic of relationship . . . The capacity to participate in mutually empathic relationships can replace the concept of the need for or the need to provide empathy. (Surrey, 1991b, p. 43).

**Mutuality** is the experience in a relationship of being affected by and of affecting another human being. It is the experience of impacting the other person in a relationship, and of being impacted. In a mutual relationship, there is emotional availability and a willingness to be influenced by the other (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 82). In addition, “relational mutuality can provide purpose and meaning in people’s lives, while lack of mutuality can adversely affect self-esteem” (Jordan et al., 1991, p. 81).

**Refined divorce rate** is defined as “the number of divorces per 1,000 married women” (Amato, 2010, p. 651).



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Divorce has become commonplace in twenty-first century American life (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Finkel et al., 2014). Estimates of divorce rates vary, but the literature consistently indicates that approximately 50% of marriages end in divorce (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 1992, 2010; Wang & Amato, 2000). The literature also indicates that individuals at midlife have the highest incidence of divorce (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014, Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). This literature review encompasses (a) an overview of marriage and divorce, (b) a brief history of marriage in Western Europe, (c) the political foundations of United States marriages, (d) the ideology of and myth of individualism, (e) the history and origins of marriage in the United States, and (f) divorce in the United States.

From the time the American colonies were settled, the unique political circumstances of American independence and the ideology of the colonists who gained independence from Great Britain influenced the trajectory of marriage patterns in the United States (Cott, 2000). Religious and political values, as well as the notion of individualism, were key factors in contributing to the many marriage traditions that are now apparent in the United States (Amato, 2014; Burgess & Locke, 1963; Cherlin, 2009). Cott (2000) maintained that the voluntary nature of colonial marriages, which paralleled the voluntary nature of allegiance to the new government, was the basis on which individualism could perpetuate. Cherlin (2009) further noted the enduring themes of American family values were those of self-sufficiency and hard work.

In the early days of Colonial settlements, during the years of 1607-1776, divorce was a legal but rare event (Phillips, 1991). Divorce was granted in the instances of adultery or abandonment. As attitudes about marriage, family, and divorce changed throughout the course of U.S. history, the parameters for divorce widened. Over time, divorce rates climbed in the United States, peaking in 1980 (Amato, 2010; Cherlin, 2010; Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

Among many factors contributing to the peak in divorce rates in 1980 was the availability of no-fault divorce, the increase in earning power of women, the availability of reliable birth control, social acceptance of divorce, as well as increased expectations of the marital relationship (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 1992; Phillips, 1991; Pinosof, 2002; Whitehead, 1996). Death had historically interrupted long-term marriages, but by the 1980s longer life expectancies precluded death and made divorce after a long-term marriage a viable option (Pinosof, 2002).

### **An Overview of Marriage and Divorce**

Coontz (2005) described how marriage practices observed in the earliest days of our nation evolved from traditions in Western Europe, with a few exceptions. The quest for marital love coincided with historical events that contributed to the changes in marriages (Coontz). Such events included the Protestant Reformation, the Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment thought of the eighteenth century, as well as the genesis of a new nation, the United States (Coontz).

Notwithstanding the great variety of cultural and marital traditions in the United States, there exists a tension, or contradiction, in the values related to marriage (Cherlin, 2009). The contradiction lies in the notion that values related to marriage in the United

States are grounded in the tradition of individualism, namely “expressive individualism” (Cherlin, 2009, p. 29). As such, marriage has come to be valued as a means through which one can attain personal and individual satisfaction and fulfillment (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Finkel et al., 2014; Whitehead 1996). In contemporary marriages, there is such a high expectation of personal or individual fulfillment that should these needs not be met, divorce has, paradoxically, become an acceptable means by which one can, or perhaps should, escape (Cherlin, 2009, p. 9).

Divorce is an unusually disruptive, stressful, and difficult life event (Demo & Fine, 2010; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Irving, 2011; Lloyd et al., 2014; Sakraida, 2008). Individuals have ranked the experience of divorce to be as stressful as losing a job or experiencing a major illness (Montenegro, 2004). To divorce is to change almost all that is known about the patterns of one’s life (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Relationships with one’s ex-spouse, friends, children, and extended family become transformed (Sakraida, 2008). Some relationships become newly functional and others are unsustainable (Comstock-Benzick, 2013).

Irving (2011) wrote that the adversarial nature of the United States’ court system makes divorce more difficult than it has to be. The system is currently structured for “winners” and “losers,” pitting former spouses and even children against each other (Irving). Irving also emphasized that “the winner-takes-all approach to traditional divorce proceedings takes the hurt, pride, and genuine disappointment of the parents and loads it onto the next generation. It is all too well known how damaging divorce can be for children” (p. 15).

## **A Brief History of Marriage in Western Europe**

In her book, *Marriage, a History*, Coontz (2005) pointed out that historically, marriage served as a social and legal contract between couples and their respective families, sanctified by a range of promises and obligations (p. 6). Although modern couples take for granted that love between spouses is the foundation for a successful and satisfying marriage, the “love-based marriage” (p. 5) has only been a cultural ideal for the last 200 years. Until the eighteenth century, marriage was viewed as a civil union in which couples were expected to carry out social obligations and produce children, who would then carry on the family name and become productive citizens of society (Coontz). Prior to the eighteenth century, individuals sometimes married for love and love was the foundation of many marriages (Coontz). Nevertheless, love between spouses was not a priority for the entities considering the union, whether they were monarchies or parents (Coontz). According to Coontz, individuals in Western Europe up until the mid-1700s believed that “marriage had so many economic and social ramifications for all social classes that people generally believed it would be foolish to make such a momentous decision entirely on their own” (p. 117).

Discussing the history of marriage, Coontz (2005) emphasized that whether a marriage was love-based or not, the union was never solely about the two people joining together in matrimony. The family was the first arbiter and influencer over who married whom (Coontz). In time, religion and government both weighed in on the legal process of marriage, and, of course, its dissolution. Phillips (1991) noted:

There is general agreement, however, that over time spouses chose each other increasingly on the basis of personal qualities than in terms of the considerations

of interest, and that responsibility for choosing marriage partners shifted to the individual concerned, so that others (such as their parents) played a diminishing role. (p. 107).

While family, religion, and government have long impacted marriage, trends in Western Europe eventually influenced American attitudes about marriage. Coontz (2005) noted that in general, the purpose of marriage among commoners in Western Europe around the time the British colonies in North America were settled was for husbands and wives to join each other as workmates in earning a living (Coontz, 2005).

### **The Political Foundations of United States Marriages**

Cott (2000) emphasized the importance of the Protestant Reformation in fueling an exodus to the North American British colonies in order for individuals to exercise their individual religious beliefs. The earliest colonial settlers arrived at different points along the East Coast, beginning in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607 (Woolley, 2007). Extreme conservative practices were necessary to ensure survival, and marriage also was an important component to survival. Obedience to social and marital practices was paramount (Coontz, 2005; Stone, 1994). Stone (1994) wrote that obedience, rather than individualism, was the undermining characteristic upon which the foundation of a fragile and new government of the United States was built. The new government could have been negatively impacted had tyranny erupted due to a lack of obedience and diligent observation to social expectations (Stone).

Cott (2000) emphasized that the consent by both parties to marry was a distinctive feature in the emerging democracy and “American political ideals” (p. 3). Inasmuch as the new United States government was founded on the basis of “mutual protection,

economic advantage and common interest” (p. 16), marriage was the social contract that produced government. Cott also referenced numerous papers authored by Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams, which equated marriage to the new government (p. 20). Individuals in the new country were free to choose their spouses as they were free to choose their fledgling democratic government. Thus, Cott emphasized, marriage was elevated from its previous hierarchy of domination and obedience, to one of “*conjugal love* (emphasis in original) . . . where there existed a mutual reciprocity of feeling which was the basis for the ideal marriage” (p. 16).

Cherlin (2009), in his book *The Marriage Go-round*, noted the perceptible mismatch between social duty and personal will. Cherlin emphasized that from the genesis of our nation there was a contradiction between the desire for, and belief in, individualism and the strong tradition of marriage and marital union – as long as individuals’ race and social class matched. Furthermore, Cherlin proposed that colonists’ adoption of British common law facilitated a type of individualism that came to be co-opted by the notion of family (p. 43).

Cantor (1993) described British common law as the rule of law, originally enacted via the Magna Carta in 1215, designed to protect citizens’ property, provide basic rights, and safeguard citizens from arbitrary actions by the King (pp. 454-455). According to Cott (2000), common law became the foundation for the legal system in the United States. Furthermore, common law provided the framework for the management of marriage, families, employers, and the duties within those realms. Thus, marriage was considered a form of governance. Under common law, a woman relinquished her identity and became subsumed to her husband’s estate, as did subsequent children of the union

(Cott). The status as head of household in Colonial America “qualified a man to be a participating member of a state” (Cott, p. 7). Furthermore, marriage was available to white, male, property owners, ascribing to monogamous, Christian marriage (Cott).

It is worth noting that while documents may have read that individuals were “free” to choose whom they married, there were laws that prohibited cross racial marriage and sexual relationships. African slaves were not free to choose whom they married. Eltis (2008) noted that approximately 600,000 Black slaves entered the United States in the period from 1644 to 1867. The majority of slaves were from Africa (Eltis). Will (1999) emphasized that slaves were brought to fulfill a labor need, not be integrated into society; thus, they were accorded none of the rights or privileges of American culture, including marriage. Conventional thought held that marriage was considered a civic responsibility, partially for the conveyance of property rights (Will). As Black slaves had no rights, there was no need for marriage.

Abolitionists claimed that slavery debased the sanctity of marriage (Coontz, 2005). “They called the denial to slaves of legally recognized and binding marriages a human tragedy, and a crying affront to American pretensions to value the purity of family life” (Coontz, 2005, p. 57). Furthermore, Cott (2000) emphasized that disenfranchised groups such as Mormons and Native Americans were forced to alter their marital traditions in order to become citizens of the United States (p. 123).

The voluntary nature of choice and consent, both in government and in marriage, contributed to the uniquely American way of thinking about oneself as a stand-alone, independent individual, free to make one’s own choices and decisions independent of

others (Coontz, 1992). Bellah et al. (2008) described the distinctly American attitude of “the dignity, indeed the sacredness of the individual . . . in order to maximize one’s own self-interest” (p. 142). The ideology of American individualism accounts for the belief in making one’s way through the world by virtue of hard work and determination, without reliance upon others (Bellah et al.; Coontz, 1992; Stone, 1994; Turner, 2008). In this context, “individuals” refers to those who were White. It is important to note that as the paradigm of individualism was emerging, there was the paradoxical practice of slavery in the United States wherein “individuals” relied heavily upon the exploited labor of slaves (Cott, 2000; Stevenson, 1991).

### **The Ideology of Individualism and the Myth of Individualism in the United States**

Cott (2000) noted that the ideology of individualism was a prominent feature beginning in the formative days of the United States, as the first settlers arrived, intent on exercising religious freedom and pursuing financial opportunities. Individualistic ideology holds that each person is solely responsible for his or her success or failure; and that in the face of adversity; an individual is expected to “pull himself up by his bootstraps” (Turner, 2008, p.198). Cherlin (2009) noted that many early settlers from Europe were Calvinists who believed that a person’s personal relationship with God was of utmost importance for salvation. Other Christian sects preached the way to God and salvation was obtainable only through the clergy (Cherlin). According to Cherlin, the unorthodox view of the Calvinists “formed the basis for individualism’s later growth” (p. 42).

Coontz (1992) pointed out that life in colonial America for the early settlers was only sustainable through the reciprocal sharing of resources and the exchange of favors



between each other. While the ideology of individualism was coming to fruition, the practices of the early settlers were quite the opposite of individualism. In order to survive, sharing resources and depending upon each other were crucial. Thus, despite actual practice of the early settlers, there arose in American sentiment the curious paradox of independence and self-reliance (Coontz).

Mount (1981) reviewed individualism in America and concluded that individualism is a myth, albeit one that retains a strong grip on American consciousness. Mount emphasized, “The myth of the self-made man has exercised peculiar power on Americans. Its power to make the well-to-do feel good and the poor feel guilty has not appreciably abated” (p. 364). Other writers have pointed out failing to acknowledge our obvious dependence on others, including slaves, perpetuates the myth of individualism (Jordan, 1991).

Oyserman, Coon, and Kimmelmeier (2002) illustrated of the ideology of individualism when they asserted, “Protestantism and the process of civic emancipation in Western societies resulted in social and civic structures that championed the role of individual choice, personal freedom, and self-actualization” (p. 4). Moreover, the authors stated, “From the beginning, Americans have been enjoined to value ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ and to think of themselves as separate and independent individuals, isolated from others” (p. 4).

Coontz (1992) discussed the “myth of self-reliance” (p. 69), illuminating the many ways early settler families depended not only on the wise agricultural practices of the Native Americans that resulted in bountiful food and game, but also on each other. It was only through the help of the indigenous peoples that early settlers survived their first

winter in the colonies in 1607 (Coontz). Furthermore, families depended upon each other, their religious organizations, and upon the structure of government to tend to their sick, educate their children, and provide food in times of need (Coontz).

Additionally, in the process of this literature review, it became clear that from the earliest days of this nation, two opposing ideologies emerged. The first is the belief in the voluntary nature of government and the community organizations that supported democracy (Cott, 2000). The second ideology of individuality and self-reliance as the foundations of success effectively concealed the efforts of women, slaves, immigrants, and others whose unsung efforts contributed to a few individuals' success (Miller, 1988). Turner (2008) noted that Americans are curiously unmindful of the ways human beings are interconnected and dependent upon each other for survival.

Jordan (1991) also argued that the concept of individualism is a myth. In practice, the appearance of one's individual success is maintained by hiding how achievements involve dependence on the help, sacrifice, or exploited assistance of others (Jordan). In our nation's history, many individuals who attained financial success did so by exploiting others' physical labor and individual human rights (Hartling, 2008; Jordan & Hartling, 2002). Loewen (2011) gave an obvious example of the exploitation of physical labor and human rights when he noted that without the slave trade, the agricultural South would never have been as prolific as it was, and perhaps may never have had the financial resources to attempt to secede from the United States.

Turner (2008) noted that in United States' contemporary culture, the misconception of independence is perpetuated by the ideology that citizens can, and should, pursue their own personal happiness and economic self-sufficiency. In a capitalist

culture, such as that in the United States, success is not primarily defined in relational terms, such as the quality of one's relationships with others, but in the degree to which one has attained and accumulated material goods and other services that are believed to enhance one's quality of life (Kilbourne, 1999).

Miller (2003) asserted the ideology of individualism becomes a zero sum game for women, as relationships and mutuality are central to their experience of themselves and their environment. A world of competition and exclusivity is designed for men, and under such a structure men, namely white men, are more advantaged in attaining social success, especially given that their relational support is obscured and devalued (Miller).

### **History and Origins of Marriage in the United States**

The history of marriage in the United States can be traced back as early as 1607, when the first settlers landed in Jamestown, Virginia (Woolley, 2007). Cott (2000) wrote that as settlers arrived in colonial America, their main concerns were for establishing a community and organizing a means for attaining supplies essential to basic survival. For early settlers, marriage was not romantic; it was essential. One way to ensure survival was by adhering to the social and religious norms of the community (Cott).

Amato (2014) noted the institutional marriage as first described by Burgess and Locke (1945) was the prevailing marital model in early America prior to the industrial revolution. Couples and their children worked together to produce the goods needed to survive (Amato). The family unit, consisting of extended kin, the community, and government counted on the stability of marriage to contribute to the organization of society (Amato). Some of these marriages were satisfying, but the expectation or acknowledgement of personal satisfaction within marriage was nonexistent (Amato).

Furthermore, Amato (2014) stressed that religious values, social mores, and the law tightly regulated behavior. In the institutional marriage, family structure was patriarchal; a husband was the head and legal representative of the family and was expected to make and carry out the major household decisions.

### **Emergence of love-based marriage in the United States.**

The ideals supporting a love-based marriage grew out of the eighteenth century Enlightenment position that humans were meant to pursue happiness (Coontz, 2005; Stone, 1994; Watt, 1992). Stone (1984) emphasized that Enlightenment thinkers Defoe, Hogarth, and Mandeville promoted a model of self-improvement that would lead to greater happiness in one's life. Self-improvement, realized from the Enlightenment perspective, was "based on behavior that made use of personal self-interest and passions so as to benefit society" (Stone, p. 81). Influential American thinkers of the time, including Benjamin Franklin, championed the values of self-improvement and hard work as the keys to success (Stone). The characteristic of self-improvement is a cornerstone of the American belief that hard work results in great achievement (Stone).

Corresponding with the beliefs in personal happiness and achievement through hard work was the idea that marriages should be based on love, not on financial or political advancement (Coontz, 2005; Cherlin, 2009). Furthermore, the urbanization of the United States meant that individuals were leaving rural areas to live and work in cities, thus giving young people greater freedom to socialize outside of the family circle (Coontz, 2005). Greenfield (2013) noted the gradual increase in urban population, which increased from 10% in 1850 to approximately 80% in 2000. The rise in urban dwellers had a profound impact upon marriage (Greenfield).

Burgess, Locke, and Thomas (1963) contended that the rapid expansion of the United States, and the Industrial Revolution changed the structure of the family. Described as the “Modern Democratic Family” (p. 19), Burgess et al. noted the features contributing to the breakdown of the patriarchal structure of family: the freedom to choose one’s mate based on romance and compatibility, independence of young married couples from their parents, greater equality between husband and wife, and more family decisions made through discussion between the husband and wife (p. 19). Burgess et al. also emphasized the variety of cultural and social factors that contributed to diversions from this model, including social class, race, and whether the family was located in an urban or rural area.

***Romanticized companionate marriage 1850-1900.*** Finkel et al. (2014) suggested the love-based marriage progressed from a romanticized model to the companionate-breadwinner model of marriage. Extending from 1850 to 1900, the romanticized marriage was, according to Finkel et al., “a romanticized but elusive ideal” (p. 4). The romanticized love-based marriage emphasized the emotional tie between spouses and highlighted the division of gender roles necessary for the family to thrive (Amato, 2014). O’Day (1994) noted that the idea of romantic love as the basis for marriage clashed with the hierarchy of marriage and the strict gender roles in place during the Victorian era.

Although family structure had moved from the institutional, strictly patriarchal model, Coontz (1992) wrote that Victorian notions about gender differences made love-based marriages difficult to achieve. Precisely because of the emergence of the love-based, companionate marriage model, there arose a contradiction between the notions of individualism and pursuit of self-interest, and the implication of dependency encouraged

in the love-based marriage. As Coontz aptly noted, “The mutual reliance between individualism and interdependence could be preserved only by first sharpening the division of labor between men and women, then by emphasizing the ways that men and women required each other” (p. 59).

Furthermore, Coontz (2005) asserted that Victorian era social mores, especially of those in White upper social classes, during the late nineteenth century, placed immutable gender-based social roles and rituals, both inside and outside of marriage. Men were expected to provide for their families and carry out the important features of their lives outside the family home. Women were discouraged from thinking too much about men’s affairs, such as finances or current events (Coontz). The social spheres in which men and women operated were totally separate, which made forming an intimate, personal relationship almost impossible (Coontz). The working classes and people of color had more opportunity to socialize together, but still held the belief that men and women were fundamentally dissimilar. Coontz further emphasized, “The new norms of the love-based, intimate marriage did not fall into place all at once but were adopted at different rates in various regions and social groups” (p. 147).

***Companionate-breadwinner marriage 1900-1965.*** The companionate-breadwinner model of marriage emerged as couples became more comfortable with the notions of emotional and physical intimacy as valuable components of marriage (Cherlin, 2005). During the 1920s, according to Coontz (1992), “Married couples were able to explore their sexuality further, as new sex manuals expanded their knowledge of techniques and they gained access to birth control” (p. 194). Americans began to view their marital ties with their spouses as more important than those with their friends,

parents, or extended family members (Amato, 2014; Cherlin, 2009). As in previous eras, critics, such as the clergy, feared the social changes that emphasized emotional and physical intimacy and personal satisfaction in marriage. Critics and clergy worried the changes would lead to increased divorce rates as couples ignored the moral obligations of marriage in lieu of personal interests (Cott, 2000).

Nevertheless, companionate marriages in which love was the ideal became the example for United States marriages (Coontz, 2005). Individuals focused on their needs as a couple and as a nuclear family within their respective marriages at the expense of close ties with friends and families (Amato, 2014; Cherlin, 2009). The shift away from extended family to immediate family interests served as a precursor to individualized marriages that developed (Amato, 2014). Putnam (2000) noted a decrease in community activities such as card playing, organized sports, and time spent with friends and neighbors during the twentieth century (pp. 93-115).

Coontz (2005) emphasized that the crash of the United States stock market in 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression changed American's attitudes about love, sex, and marriage. Coontz noted, "The red-hot concerns about the future of marriage were put on the back burner" (p. 218). Divorce rates fell in the 1930s, not only as couples and families struggled just to survive, but also because many simply could not afford to divorce (Coontz). Likewise, the Great Depression hastened women's entry into the workforce (Coontz).

As the country entered World War II, individuals and families faced work-related challenges and opportunities (Cott, 2000). Federal dollars pumped into the economy for

war work ended the Depression. Women continued to seek work outside the home, and the number of wartime marriages exploded (Cott, 2000; Cherlin, 2009).

Cott (2000) asserted that the decade of World War II was an important turning point for marriages. The prevailing attitude of marriage as “lifelong and synonymous with morality” (p. 195) was challenged by divorce, which again became increasingly prevalent. Phillips (1991) noted that as divorce rates during the Depression had fallen, divorce increased again after World War II ended, perhaps due to hasty wartime marriages.

The GI Bill enacted in 1944 gave unprecedented entitlements to veterans of World War II and their families in the form of unemployment wages, job training, college education, and mortgage funds for homes (Cott, 2000). Federal support continued to reinforce the cultural image of men as the heads of their households and as the breadwinners of their families. Cott (2000) wrote that even as women entered the workforce in greater proportions than ever before, the “cultural prescription for women to see themselves first as nurturant wives and mothers positioned them as secondary earners if they sought employment” (p. 193).

The economy after WWII boomed as individuals sought newly modern conveniences. Furthermore, the robust economy provided many families with greater discretionary income to purchase items such as washing machines and dryers, electric mixers, and ovens. Coontz (2005) noted that in the five years following WWII, purchases of household furnishings and appliances increased by 240%, and “by the mid-1950’s nearly 60 percent of the population had ‘middle-class’ income levels, compared with only 31 percent in the prosperous twenties” (p. 231).



Marriage scholars noted that marital relations seemed to improve during the 1950s, as divorce rates were stable all through this decade (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Whitehead, 1996). In fact, it was the first time, since the 1850s that divorce did not increase (Cherlin, 2009). The United States experienced unprecedented economic growth and prosperity during the 1950s (Coontz, 2005; Cott, 2000). Coontz (2005) suggested that during the 1950s the most widely recognized and acceptable model family was the nuclear family, consisting of heterosexual parents and their offspring. Furthermore, marriage was viewed as “the gateway to the good life” (Coontz, p. 232). Cherlin (2009) wrote that never before had families been so independent of extended family and community groups. Couples married young and the husband continued to be the principal breadwinner for the family (Coontz). Sarkisian and Gerstel (2012) disputed the notion that all families became independent of extended family. The authors maintained that politicians and governmental agencies co-opted the notion of family to indicate white, heterosexual nuclear family consisting of a father, a mother, and their children. Sarkisian and Gerstel asserted, “the emphasis on nuclear family – with its exclusion of the extended family – is narrow, even deleterious, and misses much of family life (p. 3).

The 1960s were a pivotal time for many facets of U.S. culture, including marriage and divorce (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 1992, 2005; Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007; Whitehead, 1996). Cott (2000) noted the abundance of written commentary about the sexual revolution, the fight for women’s rights, the Vietnam War, civil rights, and how these events contributed to the changing values of U.S. society. Cott described changing sexual norms this way: “The mass marketing of the birth control pill enabled sex to be more

decisively separated from pregnancy than ever before, severing a link in the chain between sex and marriage” (p. 202).

### **Emergence of the individualized marriage model.**

During the 1960s, the “individualized model of marriage” (Cherlin, 2004, p. 852) replaced the companionate model of marriage as individuals began to focus on their own self-development and personal satisfaction (Amato, 2014; Cherlin, 2004; Finkel et al., 2014). Cherlin (2004) described the individualized marriage as one in which both partners expect each other and the marriage to meet or at least be in accordance with their personal and self-fulfillment goals. Amato (2014) credited the Human Potential Movement and the writings of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow as influential in contributing to the individualistic marriage. Maslow’s (1954/1970) theory of changing needs held that as lower levels of basic needs, such as shelter and adequate food are met, people and societies turn their attentions toward fulfilling expressive needs such as education, political activism, and personal accomplishments (Lesthaeghe, 2014).

Furthermore, Amato (2014) stated, “In contrast to companionate marriages, individualistic marriages are successful only to the extent that they meet each spouse’s deepest need for personal growth and self-actualization” (p. 42). According to Amato, the appearance of individualistic marriage can be attributed to “a long-term, pervasive shift in Western culture” (p. 42). Increased prosperity, changing social norms, and the ideology of individualism contributed to the shift in culture (Amato).

Whitehead (1996) described the “psychological revolution” (p. 46) that occurred as Americans began to focus on their inner, emotional selves, noting that individuals’ “sense of individual well-being became more dependent on the richness of their

emotional lives.” (p. 46). Unhappiness was described less in terms of one’s current situation, such as job or income, and more in terms of “personal satisfaction” (p. 47).

Bellah et al. (2008) described the quest for personal satisfaction as “expressive individualism” (p. 333). Self-expression of one’s uniqueness is at the core of expressive individualism. Cherlin (2004) noted that the implications of expressive individualism in marriage were that spouses expressed happiness in their marriages to the extent they were able to pursue their personal goals of self-fulfillment, rather than achieve happiness through pleasing their spouses and raising their children.

### **Suffocation model of marriage.**

Finkel et al. (2014) proposed a model of marriage based on the widespread acceptance of the idea of individualism in United States culture. The model extends the proposition by Cherlin (2009) that expressive individualism in marriage focuses on each partner achieving personal growth across the lifespan. Cherlin noted expressive individualism “is not incompatible with lifelong marriage, but it requires a new kind of marriage in which the spouses are free to grow and change and in which each feels personally fulfilled” (p. 90).

Finkel et al. (2014) noted the key tenets of the suffocation model of marriage are based on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1954/1970) proposed that as individuals’ lower order needs such as food and safety are met, they will seek to fulfill higher orders of needs such as esteem and self-actualization. The defining principles for the suffocation model of marriage include the notion of fulfilling one’s higher order needs such as personal growth and self-fulfillment through marriage, with less emphasis placed on marriage meeting lower needs, such as safety and food (Finkel et al.). To meet

higher order needs within marriage requires considerable insight on the part of both partners (Finkel et al.). Insight is developed over time and through effort put into the quality of the relationship (Finkel et al.).

Finkel et al. (2014) asserted that, in reality, couples have actually reduced the amount of time and psychological resources they invest into their marriages. Despite the lack of resources invested into marriage, couples still require these higher order needs be met. Thus, “insufficient investment to meet the emphasis on higher needs has undermined spouses’ marital quality and personal wellbeing” (Finkel et al., p. 3). To have these higher order needs met, couples must be willing to increase the time and resources they devote to the marital relationship (Finkel et al.).

Furthermore, Finkel et al. (2014) contended that Americans want more opportunities for personal growth and fulfillment within marriage, and yet asserted there are signs that couples are not engaging in the activities necessary to sustain a higher-level marriage (Finkel et al.). Married couples spend less time with others than with their spouses, a trend that has increased since 1975 (Finkel et al.). As such, couples are relying heavily on each other to fulfill more domains of satisfaction in areas that might have been fulfilled by other activities and time spent with community organizations, friends, and family members. Furthermore, some spouses may not have the skills or desire to fulfill other individuals’ roles (Finkel et al.).

In their discussion, Finkel et al. (2014) acknowledged it was too soon to know whether their suffocation model accurately depicts marriages of differing sociodemographic groups. Furthermore, the authors did not determine whether their suffocation model is applicable across cultures, income, and education levels.

## **Divorce in the United States**

According to Amato (2014), institutional marriages, of the type prevalent prior to the Industrial Revolution, rarely ended in divorce. Pinsky (2002) explained that prior to the middle of the twentieth century, death was more likely than divorce to end a long-term marriage. Phillips (1991) noted that in most of the colonies settled after 1607, divorce “was permitted on the grounds of adultery and desertion” (p. 37). Nevertheless, in Plymouth Colony legal separations and even divorce were permissible in cases of violence or extreme incompatibility (Phillips).

Hurtado (1999), who documented the settlement of California in the early 1800s, described that criteria for divorce were much broader than on the east coast of the United States. Individuals could seek divorce for “natural impotency, adultery, extreme cruelty, willful desertion, neglect, fraud, and conviction of felony” (Hurtado, p. 102).

As the institutional model of marriage developed into the romanticized version of the companionate, love-based marriage, divorce became more commonplace, though hardly socially acceptable (Phillips, 1991). According to Phillips (1991), divorce rates increased dramatically in the United States at the end of the nineteenth century. “There were almost 10,000 divorces in 1867, but by 1906 there were more than 72,000, a sevenfold increase that far exceeded population growth” (Phillips, p. 121). In England, the number of divorces granted between the years 1870 and 1874 averaged just 215 divorces (Phillips). Coontz (1992) also noted the sharp increase in divorce during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Coontz explained, “the insistence that marriage be based on true love and companionship spurred some to call for further liberalization of divorce laws” (p. 180).

Phillips (1991) explained the paradox of divorce “liberalization” (p. 172).

Although grounds for divorce became more liberal and expanded from adultery and abandonment to include persistent drunkenness and cases of prolonged violence, divorce was still highly controlled, socially unacceptable, and available only to the middle and upper classes. Phillips wrote,

If divorce law liberalization was not intended to extend divorce to the lower classes, neither was it designed to emancipate women . . . The grounds recognized in the divorce laws were assumed to be male offenses for the most part, such that divorce was less a way of freeing women than of protecting them. To this extent the divorce laws were part of a complex of paternalistic legislation that sought to protect women from the most harmful implications of their inferior status without attempting to change their status significantly. (p. 172)

After a marriage boom early in the twentieth century, divorce rates increased after World War I (Cootnz, 2005; Cott, 2000; Phillips, 1991). Phillips (1991) attributed the rise in divorce after World War I to several factors: (a) hasty marriages before the war that did not withstand wartime separation, (b) wartime trauma and deprivation contributed to spouses’ unwillingness to improve already fragile marital unions, and (c) divorce became more acceptable (p. 190). In general, attitudes toward divorce became increasingly liberal.

Phillips (1991) determined that, geographically, attitudes about divorce varied, as did states’ policies on divorce. States such as South Carolina and New York had stringent policies for granting divorces (Phillips). Other states, such as Illinois, Utah, South Dakota, and Nevada were so-called havens for “divorce migration” (Phillips, p. 160). The

divorce migration states required little more than temporary residency to obtain a divorce. A meeting of the National Congress on Uniform Divorce Laws in 1906 attempted to develop a national divorce code, but was unsuccessful (Phillips, p. 157). The outcry against liberal divorce policies stemmed from the belief that the availability of divorce would increase its instance. Phillips explained that churches and governments worldwide were critical of the generally liberal divorce policies of the United States and portrayed “America as a nation verging on perdition” (p. 155).

Cott (2000) indicated that Federal and state courts continued to wrangle with how to resolve states’ differences in divorce allowances. Furthermore, the enforcement of alimony and child support judgments was not uniform across state lines, meaning divorced women and their children were susceptible to economic disadvantage and poverty (Cott). The acceptance and the increased incidence of divorce made it necessary for states to enact policies to protect divorced spouses and children from poverty. Thus the government continued to be a stakeholder in family issues (Cott).

As divorce became a hallmark of American life, sociologists during the 1950s began to view divorce as a way to correct a mistake in mate selection (Coontz, 2005; Whitehead, 1996). Coontz (2005) pointed out that social commentators “expressed none of the panic that earlier social scientists had felt when they first realized divorce was a permanent feature of the love-based marital landscape” (p. 233). Social scientists in the 1950s hypothesized that divorce rates would stabilize as individuals sought guidance in the new field of marital and family counseling (Coontz). Prominent sociologists Burgess and Locke (1963) notably commented, “the companionship family relies upon

divorce as a means of rectifying a mistake in mate selection” (p. 451). Furthermore, Burgess and Locke also incorrectly predicted divorce would not increase in the future.

According to Cott (2000) and Phillips (1991), prior to the availability of no-fault divorce in the 1970s, one party to the marriage had to prove the spouse had breached the marital contract. California, in 1970, was the first state to enact no-fault divorce. No-fault divorce allowed couples to petition for divorce in the absence of wrongdoing. Most other states, except New York, followed suit over the next decade (Cott; Phillips). New York was the lone state holding out until 2010, when no-fault divorce was finally enacted (Woo, 2010).

Stevenson and Wolfers (2007) pointed out “divorce rates rose sharply, doubling between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s” (p. 2). Contributing factors to the increase in divorce included the reliability of birth control, the increase of women in the workforce, and the availability of no-fault divorce (Amato, 2014; Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Phillips, 1991; Whitehead, 1996). Stevenson and Wolfers asserted there is enduring controversy over the effects of birth control, women in the workforce, and no-fault divorce on the family:

While children from divorce fare worse along a range of outcomes than those from intact households, this observation does not speak to the policy-relevant question of whether those children would have been better off if their parents had not divorced. The conflict in these households may be such that children are actually better served by their parents divorcing . . . Moreover, the difficulty in establishing a causal link between divorce decisions and children’s outcomes is



compounded by the possibility that the type of parents and households that end up divorced are likely different from those who do not. (p. 5)

Whitehead (1996) asserted that “expressive divorce” (p. 45) manifests when one’s expressive individualism is not realized within marriage. Furthermore, Whitehead noted that “the inner revolution that took place . . . created a new way of thinking and talking about divorce. It also created a new rationale for divorce as an expressive as well as legal freedom” (p. 46). Whitehead described the shift in American sentiment away from viewing divorce as wrong and harmful to the children in the family, to acceptance of divorce as a way to transform one’s life. Before the 1960s, experts and popular media warned of the damages divorce wreaked on children (Whitehead). Divorce was seen as economically burdensome for both mothers and children, and the absence of a father was considered detrimental to children (Whitehead). Even during the mid-1970s, wrote Whitehead, women were being admonished to remain in their marriages “for the sake of the children” (p. 64).

Whitehead (1996) described that as expressive divorce became increasingly common, the popular language changed so that divorce was viewed as a means to transform one’s life (Whitehead). Less emphasis was placed on keeping the family together and shielding children from the detrimental effects of marital dissolution. Whitehead determined that divorce was an opportunity to realize one’s individual pursuits, and noted that following a divorce, women reported more personal agency, went back to school to attain new skills, entered the workforce, or climbed the career ladder, and gained an improved outlook on life (pp. 56-58). According to Whitehead, women

reporting positive outcomes after divorce were proof of the adoption of the expressive divorce model.

Balestrino, Ciardi, and Mammini (2013) profiled the economic consequences of the decline in influence of religion and family on marriages and divorce, and discussed contemporary post-industrial marriages, such as those taking place after the 1970s. During the post-industrial era of the 1970s up to the current era, the service market replaced the industrial market (Balestrino et al.). Both spouses typically worked outside the home, shared household work, or hired someone to do it. The service market became important as working spouses needed help completing the tasks normally assigned to the non-working spouse, usually the wife (Balestrino et al.).

Furthermore, Balestrino et al. (2013) asserted the government replaced marriage as a provider of insurance and other commodities previously available only through marriage: cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare. Since commodities previously available only through marriage became available to both genders, marriage is made redundant. Divorce is socially acceptable and legal, and cohabitation is rising and also socially acceptable (Balestrino et al.). According to Balestrino et al., individuals are better off because they can escape bad marriages, but divorce is costly in terms of the financial and emotional toll it takes (Balestrino et al.; Cherlin, 2009; Comstock-Benzick, 2013; Irving, 2011). Also, the task of dividing marital assets upon divorce is onerous. Balestrino et al. suggested that couples are avoiding the hassles of marriage because it lacks economic benefit. Instead, many couples decide to cohabitate instead of marrying each other.

### **Relational Cultural Theory (RCT)**

In her seminal work, *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976/1986), Dr. Jean Baker Miller set out to reveal and articulate how “the close study of an oppressed group reveals that a dominant group inevitably describes a subordinate group falsely in terms derived from its own systems of thought” (xix). Miller’s (1976/1986) work demonstrated how “all of living and all of development takes place only within relationships,” and that “our theories of development seem to rest at bottom on a notion of development as a process of separating from others” (xxi). Miller illuminated the importance of “relational context” (p. xxiii) in people’s lives, namely, that of subordination, oppression, living under the threat of violence including sexual violence, and noted that creating a new developmental understanding would be no easy task.

It is well documented that Miller, a psychiatrist, did not feel that the experiences her female clients were reporting in her clinical work with them fit into any traditional models of human development (Miller, 1976/1986; Robb, 2006). Miller (1976/86) noted there were two resultant explanations: Either women were not psychologically well adjusted, and thus did not follow traditional models of human development, or, women’s experiences were simply not articulated in traditional models of human development. Miller observed that nearly all of the traditional models of human development she had been taught in her psychiatric training were written by men, and she observed these models mainly reflected the experiences of men, specifically privileged white males (Jordan, 2002).

Miller (1976/86) concluded the latter of the two consequences likely explained the disconnect between her female clients’ experiences and the developmental models

she had been taught in medical school. From that perspective, Miller undertook an effort to create and promote a new understanding of women's psychological development. Miller knew her clinical experiences alone were not enough to articulate any kind of new, or alternative, model of human development, so she set about creating "free space" (Robb, 2006, p. 42), for new ways of thinking about women's development to unfold.

According to Comstock et al. (2008), Jean Baker Miller and the other founding scholars of Relational Cultural theory began their work in an effort to understand and articulate the "behind the scenes" supportive work that had traditionally been relegated to women (p. 79). Obvious to Miller (1976/1986) was that this "supportive work," which was largely devalued and ignored, was, in fact, essential to the survival of the human species (pp. 21-26). Working to recognize and understand the nuances of what was happening in the supportive role would ultimately lead to the recognition of the psychological strengths possessed uniquely by women and lead to a broader understanding of the processes of optimal human development in all people (Miller).

In an effort to understand women's development and that of all marginalized people, Jean Baker Miller invited psychologists Irene Stiver, Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, and Alexandra Kaplan to begin meeting in her home on Monday nights to talk openly and honestly about their clinical work with women (Robb, 2006). According to Robb (2006), Miller, Stiver, Jordan, Surrey, and Kaplan collaborated in producing an early body of work that included a new model of human development. The new model of human development was initially coined "self-in-relation theory" (Surrey, 1991a, p. 51). Facets of self-in-relation theory, as an alternative model of human development that valued individuation and autonomy as ultimate goals, included the following ideas:

1. We grow in, through and toward relationship.
2. For women, especially, connection with others is central to psychological well-being.
3. Movement toward relational mutuality can occur throughout life, through mutual empathy, responsiveness and contribution to the growth of each individual and to the relationship (Surrey, 1991a, pp. 58-59).

Miller wrote her work during a time of great change for American women (Comstock et al., 2008). In Miller's own clinical work with women clients, she found that the traditional views of psychological norms for wellbeing were modeled after theories proposed by and tested on white males (Comstock et al., 2008). Traditional psychological norms excluded women, people of color, and other marginalized populations. Comstock et al. (2008) asserted that the accepted notions of human development and expectation of growth toward autonomy and individuation were not adequately descriptive of women's experiences.

The core ideologies of RCT (as self-in-relation came to be known) propose that growth occurs in connection, all human beings long for connection, and that mutual empathy and mutual empowerment makes for growth-producing relationships. Jean Baker Miller (1976/1986) described the essential characteristics of growth-fostering relationships as "five good things":

1. A sense of zest and energy for both (or all) people in the relationship.
2. Empowerment to take action on behalf of oneself and others.
3. Greater knowledge or clarity about oneself, the other, and the relationship.
4. A greater sense of worth for all people in the relationship.

5. A desire for more connection (p. 3).

Furthermore, the theory acknowledges the centrality of relationships in women's lives. Women focus on relationships in their lives because they are conditioned to care for others. RCT challenges the widely-accepted view that healthy development occurs separately from relationships (Miller).

Jordan and Hartling (2002) emphasized that RCT also explores the nature of disconnection, an unavoidable aspect of relationships. Disconnection occurs when there is an absence of empathy or some sort of violation to the relationship. Jordan and Hartling wrote:

When in response to a disconnection, the injured (especially the less powerful) person is able to represent her feelings and the other person is able to respond empathically, experiences of disconnection can lead to a strengthened relationship and an increased sense of *relational competence*, i.e., being able to effect change and feeling effective in connections. However, when the injured or less powerful person is unable to represent herself or her feelings in a relationship, or when she receives a response of indifference, additional injury, or denial of her experience, she will begin to keep aspects of herself out of relationship in order to keep the relationship. (p. 49)

Withholding aspects of oneself to remain in relationship is known as the *central relational paradox* (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Miller (1976/1986) verified that RCT acknowledges the importance of relational connection in human being's lives. Furthermore, Miller stated that a woman's sense of self is "grounded in the motivation to make and enhance relatedness to others" (p. 1).

Women experience pleasure, a sense of effectiveness and self-worth when they experience their lives as coming from and leading back to connection with others (Miller). Therefore, development from an RCT perspective is seen very differently from traditional psychological models of development where autonomy and individuation are seen as hallmarks of adult maturity.

Miller (1976/1986) found that her women clients tended to negate their value and relevance to the caring for and raising of their children. She recognized as strengths what others in the field, notably men, tended to pathologize: dependency, emotionality, and vulnerability (Miller). Although traditional psychological thought has devalued these characteristics, society conditions women to engender these traits. Miller wrote that, by society's standards, women cannot win, because women's very attributes are their emotions. Men are encouraged to sublimate their emotions beginning early in life. Women, on the other hand, are socialized to tune into emotions and feelings, especially those of others (Miller). Consequently, women come to believe that all activity leads to increased emotional connection with others.

Miller (1976/1986) noted that RCT was initially conceived to understand women's psychological experiences, and has since moved forward to encompass all human experience, including men's experience. Miller believed all humans have the capacity to connect emotionally with each other; however, men are socially conditioned to move away from this at young ages.

While most human development theories acknowledge the importance of relationships in early childhood (Jordan, 1991), RCT suggests that women's development depends on and grows in connection and in relationship with others throughout the

lifespan (Jordan et al., 1991). RCT theorists describe the path of development for women as “relationship-differentiation” (p. 59) as opposed to individuation or separateness.

Relationship-differentiation describes a process by which relationships grow in depth and complexity. Jordan et al. (1991) described that the RCT model emphasizes the direction of growth is not toward greater degrees of autonomy or individuation and the breaking of early emotional ties, but toward a process of growth within relationships (p. 60). Jordan et al. (1991) also noted:

The notion of the self-in-relation involves an important shift in emphasis from separation to relationship as the basis for self-experience and development further, the relationship is seen as the basic goal of development: that is, the deepening capacity for relationship and relational competence. (pp. 52-53)

**Resilience.**

Hartling (2003) emphasized that the dominant Western cultural view of autonomy and individuation in relationships views resilience as a special quality imbued to only a few individuals. Traditional labels bear this out, as resilience has been described as self-esteem gained from individual achievement and self-sufficiency, not as the result of collaboration and connection through relationships (Hartling). RCT proposes that relationships are a primary source of one’s ability to be resilient in the face of personal and social hardships or trauma (Hartling, p. 3)

The primacy RCT places on “growth-fostering” (Hartling, 2003, p. 338) relationships means that a lack of these types of relationships inhibits an individual’s ability to be resilient. In order to reframe resiliency from an RCT perspective, we must look at traditional concepts of resilience. Hartling (2003) identified *hardiness* as a



characteristic of resilience. Individuals who display hardiness have the ability to commit themselves to what they are doing, ascribe to an internal sense of control about situations, and perceive obstacles as challenges rather than threats.

Hartling (2003) noted resilience has also been described as

1. Good outcomes, defined as the absence of deviant or antisocial behavior after experiencing adverse conditions.
2. Maintaining competence under conditions of threat.
3. Recovery from traumatic experiences. (p. 341)

The traditional conceptualizations of resilience were widely accepted in research and clinical circles and applied as the standard of stress resilience across many diverse groups of men, women, and children. Minnich (1990, as cited in Hartling, 2003) questioned the generalizability of the traditional concept to all groups. The group from which the standards for hardiness were developed were mostly white, male executives, who were themselves recipients of “a silent system of extensive support comprised of secretaries, wives, mothers, and undervalued service providers who likely made it possible for these privileged professionals to be ‘hardy’” (Hartling, 2003, p. 340).

Furthermore, Hartling (2003) emphasized that accepted beliefs about resilience infer that it is an individual personality characteristic, dependent upon temperament, intelligence, self-esteem, optimism, and internal locus of control (p. 241). Sociocultural context is also an important consideration before ascribing universal descriptions of resilience across diverse groups (Hartling).

RCT suggests that there is a greater, more encompassing definition of resilience when researchers examine the relational cultural factors that contribute to one’s

resilience. “Taking an RCT perspective might ultimately lead to defining resilience as *the ability to connect, reconnect, and resist disconnection in response to hardships, adversities, trauma, and alienating social/cultural practices*” (emphasis in original, Hartling, 2003, p. 3).

Jordan (1992) offered a model of how resilience might be incorporated into relationships, as the way to move beyond “isolation and pain to relatedness and growth” (p. 3):

1. From individual “control over” to a model of supported vulnerability;
2. From a one-directional need for support from others to mutual empathic involvement in the well-being of each person and of the relationship itself;
3. From separate self-esteem to relational confidence;
4. From the exercise of “power over” to empowerment, by encouraging mutual growth and constructive conflict;
5. From finding meaning in self-centered self-consciousness to creating meaning in a more expansive relational awareness.

### **Shame.**

Miller and Stiver (1997) wrote that without the empowering properties of relational resilience, feelings of shame can lead to disconnection and a sense of “condemned isolation” (p. 72). Jordan (2002) described shame as

The experience of feeling unworthy of empathic response from another; one senses that one’s being is not worthy of love or connection and that one’s love is also not adequate. In shame, people move into isolation and disconnection; both of these experiences contribute to silence, a loss of voice. The authentic

experience to another for fear of rejection and judgment; we move into more isolation. (p. 4)

Shame in relationships can lead to silence, objectification, disempowerment, and self-blaming (Jordan, 2002). Five steps offered by Jordan (2002) for overcoming disconnection and disempowerment whether at the systemic or personal levels included awareness, naming, connecting, critical consciousness, and assessment of risk in the context of connection. Jordan also noted, “The idea that strength occurs in connection, not separation, is a powerful challenge to the dominant paradigm” (p. 5). When individuals can challenge disconnection, self-blaming, and shame, the opportunity arises to redefine self and dispute the notion that separation is the primary human condition.

More recently, Neff (2013) carried forth many of the defining principles of RCT when she studied the concept of self-compassion. Self-compassion can be defined as the recognition and acknowledgment of our own suffering and how it is inextricably tied to universal human experience (pp. 9-13). Furthermore, Neff maintained that all human beings feel anger, sorrow, and joy in the same way. When individuals acknowledge the notion of universal suffering, compassion for others and for themselves will arise. Neff proposed that mutual relationships are at the foundation of who we are as human beings. Fostering self-compassion requires individuals to identify the centrality of relationships in human life and the commonality of human experiences. Finally, increasing self-compassion leads to greater possibility of mutually satisfying relationships with others (Neff).

## **Relational-Cultural Perspective of Divorce**

Comstock-Benzick (2013), in her book chapter “A Relational-Cultural Perspective of Divorce,” discussed her own experiences of divorce and divorce in general through the lens of RCT. Comstock-Benzick was the first to address divorce and RCT. Divorce involves the dissolution of a contractual relationship and demands an intentional engagement in the process and experience of disconnection (Comstock-Benzick). The very notion of initiating a process of disconnection is counter to nearly everything RCT espouses as essential to human beings’ psychological development and emotional well-being. The exception to pursuing connection is the relational skill of being able to sort out and end relationships that do not foster growth or mutuality (Jordan, 1992).

Comstock-Benzick’s (2013) experience of divorce and the creation of this chapter reinforced her belief in the value of marriage, a value shared by the majority of Americans (Cherlin, 2009). Furthermore, Comstock-Benzick explained how the current United States mainstream ideas about marriage and divorce came to be and presented the prevailing divorce trends within the context of RCT. She emphasized the caveat of divorce narratives in published works represents only those who have the means and option to divorce. Most mainstream literature does not address marginalized populations for which divorce, whether because of cultural, religious, or financial reasons, is not an option (Comstock-Benzick).

After providing a brief history of marriage, Comstock-Benzick (2013) discussed the paradoxical mix of expressive individualism, marriage, and the nuclear family. Comstock-Benzick suggested “relational competency” (p. 216) as an alternative to the current dynamic of expressive individualism. Relational competencies are actions that

move us toward relationship and connection with those outside the immediate family. Comstock-Benzick also discussed the relational violations that take place in litigation divorce, such as shame, fear, and humiliation, and, finally, offered insights gained from her own experience of divorce and made recommendations for future research.

Coontz (2005) proposed that marriage had historically been a way to acquire in-laws. This view is consistent with the RCT perspective on human development. Comstock-Benzick (2013) wrote that, over the life span, individuals should seek to be “expanding relational networks rather than growing increasingly autonomous or independent over our life span” (p. 326).

### **Expressive individualism and RCT.**

At the time of Comstock-Benzick’s (2013) writing, marriage and divorce had been on the rise in the United States since the 1890s, and the author underscored Cherlin’s (2009) assertion of the contradictory values in marriage. That is, Americans value the apparently opposing beliefs of marriage and individualism (Comstock-Benzick). The highly valued attributes of marriage and individualism are both prized, yet ironically, are not compatible. For the most part, Americans want to be married, ascribe to marriage, believe it to be an important milestone of adult life, and have an expectation for the marital relationship to satisfy their personal needs for happiness and self-fulfillment. Cherlin (2009) hypothesized that Americans shuttle back and forth between these values without realizing it.

Furthermore, both Comstock-Benzick (2013) and Cherlin (2009) asserted that because marriage is seen as one of the most significant aspects of adult life, many people approach the marriage ceremony, in and of itself, with such intensity, that the individuals

marrying are unprepared for the actual relational work marriage entails. As a result, people expect marriage to meet their needs for personal growth and self-fulfillment. According to Comstock-Benzick, such expectations make divorce seem almost inevitable.

Comstock-Benzick (2013) noted, “The cultural values of marriage and expressive individualism are inextricably linked to the idealized image of the nuclear family” (p. 336). American families hold fast to the notion they must be self-sufficient and not dependent on others for help. The dominant social and political view that marriage is the principal way to live one’s life negates the importance and help of extended family and kin networks (Comstock-Benzick).

Comstock-Benzick (2013) noted the range of individuals affected by divorce, including the immediate and extended family. Regardless of the reasons for divorce, its consequences ripple through family, friends, and community (Comstock-Benzick). In some aspects, divorce increases relational opportunities for family members and friends as they become involved in providing emotional or financial support (Comstock-Benzick). Divorce is the rupture of a bond sealed by law and sometimes faith.

Comstock-Benzick (2013) also emphasized that no couple enters marriage expecting to divorce, and many are able to accept each other’s faults and differences and forgive transgressions. Furthermore, in any marriage, conflict is inevitable. Couples can confront conflict and make changes, or avoid it and risk irreparable damage to the marriage (Comstock-Benzick). The RCT perspective of marital relationship proposes an even deeper relational pattern than simply confronting and making changes through conflict. Comstock-Benzick asserted, “From the RCT perspective, neither of these efforts

represents any kind of *mutual* effort to examine the ways each person may have contributed to the disconnection” (p. 342). RCT puts emphasis on both parties maintaining and making connection in relationship as well as healing disconnection in relationships. The willingness to look at what caused the disconnection, as well as to develop a plan to repair the connection, enables individuals to make more stable connections (Comstock-Benzick). Divorce signals a potentially permanent break in connection and relationship (Comstock-Benzick).

The current emphasis on marriage as a means for expressive individualism (Bellah et al., 2008) diminishes the perceived need to attain the relational competencies necessary to a successful long-term marriage. A focus on individual needs and personal growth in marriage moves away from relational competencies that are vital for human growth and survival (Comstock-Benzick, 2013). RCT advances the theory that involvement in a variety of mutually satisfying and growth-fostering networks is essential for the well-being of marriages and for humanity. With the expectation that marriage fulfills the individual’s personal agenda for happiness, divorce is an acceptable option when it does not. Expressive divorce (Cherlin, 2009; Whitehead, 1996), with its focus on individualism, does not allow for growth from a relational standpoint.

### **Adversarial divorce.**

Litigation in divorce can be the most damaging loss of connection in a relationship. Fear, shock, shame, hurt, and humiliation can all be part of the distressing and isolating experience of divorce (Comstock-Benzick, 2013). Furthermore, the legal system is designed around a win or lose dichotomy, with each spouse’s attorney using non-relational tactics to gain advantage in the case (Irving, 2011). Comstock-Benzick

(2013) wrote, “Humiliation is used to disempower, shame, devalue, and silence the opposing spouses into being unable to authentically represent themselves and/or their narrative” (p. 345). Additionally, more relational violations can occur when friends, in-laws, and others feel they must take sides against one or the other of the divorcing couple (Comstock-Benzick). Summarizing, Comstock-Benzick advised that disconnection can be healthy if done by choice and is self-protective to avoid unhealthy, non-mutual relationships.

Whitehead (1996), in her book *The Divorce Culture*, demonstrated that titles of mainstream divorce literature are gender specific in their approach to divorce (p. 59). Whitehead noted that in books aimed at men, “Divorce is characterized as a battle, a game, an adversarial struggle with a winner and a loser” (p. 58). Typical titles included: *The Fighter’s Guide to Divorce: A No-Holds-Barred Strategy for Coming Out Ahead*; *The Lion’s Share: A Combat Manual for Divorcing Males*; and *How to Dump Your Wife* (p. 58).

By contrast, Whitehead (1996) noted women’s experience of divorce in popular literature is expressed as an emotional journey. Examples of titles included *Should I Get a Divorce and How?*, *Crazy Time*, and *Living and Loving After Divorce* (p. 59).

Furthermore, Whitehead noted many of the books are “rooted in the tradition of women’s romance novels, even as it turns that tradition on its head” (p. 59).

For individuals experiencing the divorce process, Comstock-Benzick (2013) recommended collaborative divorce or mediation if at all feasible, because these methods are designed to maintain some mutuality in the divorcing couple’s relationship.

Comstock-Benzick emphasized the importance of having a strong support network,



which can help one to move through the pain of divorce, to be an effective parent, and learn to resist the “negative relational images” (p. 347) often experienced after divorce. Negative relational images refer to the self-limiting internal thoughts and pictures individuals have about their competencies (Comstock-Benzick). Finally, Comstock-Benzick advised, “It is very important to recognize and resist internalizing negative relational images because they can put one at risk for making poor relationship choices in the future” (p. 347).

### **Divorce Statistics**

The value, meaning, and sentimentality of marriage in the United States drive the political agendas reflected in the reporting of divorce statistics (Comstock-Benzick, 2013). The importance of marriage in American society makes it likely that there are political agendas behind much of what is published about marriage and divorce (Comstock-Benzick, 2013). Furthermore, literature and research often exclude diverse marital traditions that exist outside of mainstream agendas (Comstock-Benzick, 2013).

While current divorce rates of first time marriages hovers around 45% (Brown & Lin, 2012), statistics alone do not tell the story of what happens in the marital relationships that lead couples to divorce. What statistics do indicate is that the largest group of Americans divorcing is those over the age of 50 (Brown & Lin, 2012; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Many of those divorcing over the age of 50 are doing so after being in long-term marriages of 20 or more years (Montenegro, 2004). Research also indicates that women are more likely than men in this age group to initiate divorce (Brown & Lin, 2012; Hilton & Anderson, 2009; Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014; Kreider & Ellis, 2011; Montenegro, 2004).

Also unknown and uncountable by the government or statisticians are the actual numbers of cohabitating adults, who consider themselves married, the number of people who want to divorce, but who cannot due to financial or other reasons (Balestrino et al., 2013). Furthermore, it is unknown the number of people who separate but never divorce or who cohabit and then separate (Amato, 2014, Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007).

Searching for accurate and current sources for divorce statistics reveals a great deal of disparity over the true rates of divorce in the United States (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2014). While Kreider and Ellis (2011) argued divorce rates have declined or held steady since the 1980s, Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) disputed their methodology and sample sizes, concluding that true rates of divorce are still unknown.

In a recent *New York Times* article, academics traded barbs online when Justin Wolfers (2014) asserted divorce rates were not rising as reported by other demographers. Wolfers disputed Kennedy and Ruggles' (2014) claim that the divorce rate is rising and questioned their methodology. Wolfers' assertions prompted numerous comments online, including fellow demographer Steven Ruggles, co-author of the Kennedy and Ruggles study cited here, who clarified his methodology in a comment to Wolfers' article, and rejoined that the consensus of most demographers is that divorce has not declined at all. Ruggles wrote,

You are entitled to argue that ACS (American Community Survey) is wrong and SIPP (Survey of Income and Program Participation) is right. Nevertheless, I think you should acknowledge that the decline of divorce narrative is a minority viewpoint among professional demographers. (Wolfers, 2014)

Both sets of authors, however, agreed that divorce among older adults “the so-called gray divorce” (Brown & Lin, 2012, p. 3) continues to rise.

Kreider and Ellis (2011) examined, among other things, how long first marriages last, marital events, and divorce rates for women using data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) which is administered by the U.S. Census Bureau. Kreider and Ellis indicated that the U.S. Census Bureau first gathered SIPP data in 1986 and captured it every five years thereafter until 2009. The most recent SIPP, administered in 2009 ( $N = 55,497$ ) asked married adults the number of times they had been married and the month and year of all marital events. Marital events included marriage, separation, divorce, and widowhood (Kreider & Ellis). Kreider and Ellis’s (2011) analysis showed divorce rates stabilized during 1996 through 2009, although divorce rates increased in adults aged 50 and older during this same time period.

Kreider and Ellis (2011) also reported data from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), which indicated the annual divorce rate for married women increased from 15 to 20 divorces per 1,000 between 1970 and 1975. Later estimates showed that the divorce rate leveled off to approximately 20 divorces per 1,000 married women in the mid-1970s and remained steady until the mid-1990s. The authors also surmised that marital longevity fell for both men and women who wed between 1960 and 1984. The duration of marriages was longer for those who wed in the early 1960s. Furthermore, Kreider and Ellis asserted that the changes in divorce laws during the 1970s affected marital duration in later cohorts, causing it to decline.

The most recent SIPP from 2009 provides information about the marital situation of adults (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). More than half of adults had married only once (52% of

men and 58% of women). While 21% of men and 22% of women had ever divorced, the highest percentage of ever-divorced men and women was adults aged 50 to 69 (36%).

Kreider and Ellis (2011) described the duration of marriages for couples who were married at the time of the 2009 survey. Overall, 83% of currently married couples achieved their fifth anniversary. Fifty-five percent had been married at least 15 years, 35% for 25 years, and 6% had been married 50 years or more. Marriage durations were lower for Blacks and Hispanics, stemming from higher rates of divorce in Blacks and a younger age distribution among Hispanics (Kreider & Ellis). Only 77% of Blacks and 76.5% of Hispanics reached their fifth anniversaries. Forty-six percent of Blacks and 43% of Hispanics achieved their fifteenth anniversaries. Of Blacks and Hispanics, 16% and 12%, respectively, were married for 25 years, and 3% and 2% were married for over 50 years (Kreider & Ellis).

Kreider and Ellis (2011) acknowledged limitations to the data analysis that include sampling and non-sampling errors. Non-sampling errors included variables such as survey design, respondents' willingness and ability to answer correctly, honestly, or completely, and the accuracy of coded and classified answers. In summary, the analysis of SIPP data performed by Kreider and Ellis revealed that marital longevity decreased for cohorts married between 1960 and 1984, that divorce rates spiked in the 1970s as a result of no-fault divorce, and that these rates stabilized in the 1990s.

In contrast to the Kreider and Ellis study (2011), Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) presented justification for their assertion that the divorce rates had not stabilized but instead, had increased steadily. Furthermore, they asserted the rise in cohabitating couples contributed to an overall rise in union instability in all groups. Kennedy and

Ruggles reported the U.S. Government began recording divorce rates in 1867. Since that time, various entities were responsible for collecting and managing the information. Inadequate funding, incomplete reporting, and lack of detail in the information collected have contributed to a steady decline in the quality of divorce statistics.

Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) explained that the U.S. Census Bureau was first charged with gathering divorce information through state vital statistics offices. After World War II, the collection was transferred to the National Office of Vital Statistics, which introduced the Divorce Registration Area. States' compliance in reporting was sporadic, somewhat due to the lack of incentives given to states by the federal government (Kennedy & Ruggles). The collection of detailed divorce and marriage statistics through the Divorce Registration Area (DRA), now known as the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), was discontinued in 1996 due to lack of federal funding (Kennedy & Ruggles).

Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) revealed that the last year the NCHS obtained exhaustive reports from states on their divorce rates was in 1990. These reports were noted to have been quite accurate, with the exception of a few non-reporting counties within various states. By 1995, the number of non-reporting counties and states increased significantly. The authors suggested this was due to a lack of oversight as to the accuracy of the reporting states, and, as a result, omissions of divorce counts rose significantly. Kennedy and Ruggles emphasized that data collection of divorce rates by states' vital statistics offices was most accurate between 1960 and 1990.

Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) suggested that the incompleteness of reporting by state vital statistics offices is reason to suspect reports, as in Kreider and Ellis (2011),

which indicated divorce rates stabilized after 1990. Furthermore, Kennedy and Ruggles asserted the decline in divorce after 1990 is likely exaggerated: “Despite the shortcomings of the vital statistics on divorce, they provide an invaluable benchmark for evaluating alternative sources” (p. 592). Kennedy and Ruggles noted that the vital statistics error stems from underreporting, which means the true divorce rates must be at least as high as those included in the reporting states. Not only are the vital statistics inaccurate, they do not contain enough detail to evaluate the trends (Kennedy & Ruggles).

Kennedy and Ruggles (2014) contended there are reasons to be skeptical about significance of the decline in the divorce rates since 1980. The refined divorce rate does not take into account changes in distributions of age, marriage duration, or age at marriage. Over the past three decades, the population has grown substantially older, the average duration of marriages has grown, and age at marriage has increased. Since older people, those who have been married a long time, and those who marry later in life are at comparatively low risk of divorce, one would anticipate a significant decline in divorce rates simply because of changes in the characteristics of the married populations. Because age and duration-specific divorce rates from vital statistics are no longer published, it is difficult to estimate how much of the recent change is merely a reflection of change in the demographic composition of the married populations (p. 592).

### **Divorce at Midlife**

Janice Green (2010) in her book, *Divorce After 50*, wrote about the practical and legal aspects for individuals who divorce at midlife. As a practicing family lawyer, she noticed more and more of her clients who had been married for 20, 30, or 40 years were

seeking divorcing. Midlife adults had different concerns than divorcing couples in their 30s and 40s. Individuals leaving long-term marriages were concerned about financial security, the reactions of their adult children, and their health. Green wrote that divorce does not have to be devastating, rather “divorce later in life has the potential to be a creative turning point and a positive beginning for you” (p. 2).

### **Midlife divorce statistics.**

Brown and Lin (2012) asserted “Although divorce has been studied extensively among younger adults, the research to date has essentially ignored divorce that occurs to adults aged 50 and older” (p. 731). In an effort to better understand divorce in adults 50 and older, the authors investigated existing data to show how the divorce rate among middle-aged and older adults

changed between 1990 and 2010. Brown and Lin compared the 1990 age-specific divorce rate data from the U.S. Vital Statistics with their own estimate of today’s divorce rate using the 2010 American Community Survey ( $N = 1,138,468$  persons aged 50 and older;  $n = 647,657$  persons aged 50-64, and  $n = 490,811$  persons aged 65 and older).

In order to estimate the current divorce rates of adults middle-aged (50-64) and older (65+), Brown and Lin (2012) took the number of respondents who answered “yes” to having experienced divorce in the prior 12 months and divided this number by the number of respondents at risk for divorce. Individuals determined to be at risk for divorce were those who divorced or were widowed in the past 12 months and those who remained married but were separated at the time of the interview. Furthermore, Brown and Lin described and identified factors associated with divorce among middle-aged and

older adults. Factors associated with divorce included demographic characteristics, economic resources, and marital biography.

Brown and Lin's (2012) analysis demonstrated the prevalence of divorce rates among middle-aged and older individuals, which doubled over the period from 1990 to 2010, increasing from 4.9 to 10.2 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons. The increase in divorce is greater than the average trend of divorce for all married persons, which was 19.0 in 1990 (Clark, 1995, as cited in Brown & Lin), and 17.9 in 2010 (Brown & Lin).

In other words, fewer than 1 in 10 persons who divorced in 1990 were aged 50 and over. In 2010, the estimated rate of divorce by individuals aged 50 and over had increased to 1 in 4 persons (Brown & Lin, 2012). The authors projected that if the divorce rate remains constant for the next 20 years as expected, the number of persons aged 50 and over who divorce will rise by one-third (Brown & Lin, 2012). The divorce rate for middle-aged adults rose from 6.9 to 13.1 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons, and from 1.8 to 4.8 among older adults (Brown & Lin, 2012).

Brown and Lin's (2012) analysis demonstrated specific characteristics of middle-aged and older divorcing individuals. Black Americans, middle-aged and older, have the highest divorce rate at 20.5 persons per 1,000 married persons. The Hispanic divorce rate is 11.3 persons per 1,000 married persons, and White Americans' divorce rate is 9.0 (Brown & Lin).

Brown and Lin (2012) noted economic resources also affect the divorce rates of middle-aged and older adults. Individuals with college degrees are considerably less likely to divorce (8.5 persons per 1,000 married persons) compared to those with less



education (9.6-11.5 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons). Unemployed middle-aged and older adults have higher divorce rates than the employed (21.2 persons versus 12.4 per 1000 married persons) (Brown & Lin). Marital order and marital duration noticeably affect the risk of divorce. For remarried individuals 50 and older, the divorce rate is 2.5 times higher than in first marriages: 17.2 divorced persons per 1000 married persons versus 6.9 per 1000 married persons (Brown & Lin).

Brown and Lin (2012) noted in their conclusions that the divorce rate among middle-aged and older adults has doubled between 1990 and 2010, while that of the general population has grown stable, with a slight decline. The authors had this to say about their research findings:

The rise in the rate of divorce among adults aged 50 and over is substantively significant given that half of the married population is aged 50 and older; it should not be dismissed as a mere artifact of a small base rate. The doubling of the divorce rate coupled with the aging of the population translates into a considerable share of today's divorces occurring to middle-aged and older adults (p. 737).

Brown and Lin (2012) emphasized that their report was not designed or intended to explain the reasons why divorce in this age group has become so prevalent. Furthermore, the authors stated, "individuals aged 50 and older have the most complex marital biographies of the U.S. population" (p. 739).

The increase of divorce during middle and older age has important implications not only for the individuals involved, but also for children and extended family members (Brown & Lin, 2012). Relationships with adult children may change and not having a

spouse to care for one's needs and look out for one's health could be detrimental to the long-term well-being of the divorced spouses. Divorce often represents a downturn in economic status (Brown & Lin, 2012). Thus, the rise in divorce in midlife could place additional burdens on society as individuals rely on public institutions for physical, emotional, and financial support.

Brown and Lin (2012) emphasized, "It is essential that researchers begin to examine the ramifications of divorce during later life for subsequent well-being" (p. 740). The authors suggested that future research on the mental health needs of those over 50 should include needs related to divorce, and not solely focus on risks related to other effects of age, such as widowhood, for example. Finally, Brown and Lin suggested that future research should look at the predictors and consequences of divorce that occur in middle-aged and older individuals.

#### **Characteristics of midlife divorced individuals.**

Montenegro (2004) produced one of the earliest and largest studies to report the characteristics of adults divorcing at midlife, many after a long-term marriage. Although the research was undertaken more than 10 years ago, the study represented a trend that would be closely followed by subsequent social science research (Bair, 2007; Brown & Lin, 2012; Green, 2010; Lloyd et al., 2014; Radina, Hennon, & Gibbons, 2008; Sakraida, 2005, 2008). Montenegro's account also represents the most extensive probe into midlife individuals' lives after divorce.

The AARP-commissioned study is entitled "*The divorce experience: A study of divorce at mid-life and beyond*" (Montenegro, 2004). The report examined the conditions and effects of divorce during midlife. Results were based on survey interviews of 1,147

participants, 566 females and 581 males, all between the ages of 40 and 79, who divorced at least once during their 40s, 50s, or 60s. The respondents were divorced or had divorced and remarried between the ages of 40 and 69. Of the total respondents, 51% were male and 49% were female. The largest number of respondents was between the ages of 50 and 59, at 39%. Thirty percent were between 60 and 69, 17% between 40 and 49, and the smallest number of respondents (13%) were between 70 and 79. Most of the respondents divorced between the ages of 40 and 49 (73%), with 22% divorcing between the ages of 50 and 59, and just 6% after age 60. The ethnicity of respondents was overwhelmingly White (83%), with just 9% Black respondents, 6% Hispanic respondents, and 2% of respondents identifying with “other race.” Just over half (56%) of the respondents were currently separated or divorced, and 31% had remarried. Nine percent stated they were living with their partner and 5% were widowed (Montenegro, 2004).

Montenegro (2004) noted, “Since their divorce occurred when they were in their 40s or older, long-term marriages among divorcees are the rule” (p.16). More than half (64%) of the respondents were married for 10 years or longer when they divorced. About a third (32%) were married 20 years or longer, and approximately a third (35%) were married less than 10 years (Montenegro). The totals do not add up to 100% because respondents who marked they were married 20 years or more, also marked they had been married 10 years or more.

Deciding when to divorce varied among the respondents (Montenegro, 2004). Generally, adults 40-79 made the decision to divorce relatively quickly. About a third (32%) contemplated their divorce for under a year. Some were surprised when their spouses asked for a divorce (30%), and women were more likely than men to surprise

their spouse (26% versus 14%). Of those who delayed their decisions about divorce, 17% did so for five years or longer. Of those delaying divorce, 43% did so for the sake of their children. The second factor for delaying divorce was to prepare financially (21%).

Asked for the three major reasons why they divorced, respondents included verbal, physical, and emotional abuse (34%), different values and lifestyles (29%), and cheating (27%) as the principal reasons. Additionally, Montenegro (2004) reported 24% of respondents stated they had fallen out of love with their spouse or had no other obvious problems, experienced money problems (14%), or felt the spouse was not carrying his or her weight in the marriage (14%).

Montenegro (2004) addressed the impact of divorce, noting that most respondents felt it was more difficult than losing a job (47%), equal to experiencing a major illness (30%), and less distressing than the death of a spouse. Although some respondents worried about the future, most, especially women, had no regrets (49% women versus 29% men) about their decision to divorce. More women than men stated that their children were sad but not devastated about the news of their parent's divorce (50% versus 22% men). Both sexes feared being alone after divorce (45%), and women were more worried about becoming impoverished (28%). Men feared not seeing their children (20%) (Montenegro).

Montenegro (2004) expanded on the notion of life after divorce. Respondents named the top three things they liked about life after divorce. Freedom and independence to do what they wanted was the highest response (41%), with having one's own identity (36%) another benefit, and self-fulfillment and doing things for oneself (35%). Other reasons cited included not having to answer to someone else (31%), better financial

situation (22%), and being with a better partner (18%). Women were more likely to respond positively to having their own identity and not having to deal with another person. Men were more likely to report better finances and a better partner (Montenegro).

Montenegro (2004) also described the negative aspects of divorce, which included not having someone to do things with (34%), financial difficulties (26%), and not having someone around to talk to (21%). More women disliked the financial difficulties that came with divorce at midlife, whereas men disliked not having a sexual relationship. Men also reported they disliked the unhealthy behaviors that came with divorce, such as poor eating habits (Montenegro).

With regard to physical health post-divorce, Montenegro (2004) found both men and women reported either very good or good physical health (33% and 35%, respectively). A few (11%) reported excellent health and even fewer (4%), poor health. Most (76%) also felt they made the right decision to divorce with more women (76%) than men (64%) confident in the decision. Remarriage occurred in 32% of the divorcees, and the majority said their marriages are strong (67%). Those in their 50s were less likely than those in their 40s or 60s to claim their new marriages were strong.

Montenegro (2004) affirmed the majority of divorcees date after divorce (82%), with women more likely to stay single than men (Montenegro, 2004). After dating, 54% of men remarried, but only 39% of women remarried. Those with incomes above \$75,000 per year were more likely to date compared to those with lower incomes (40% versus 26% for total; Montenegro).

Montenegro (2004) reported that 23% of divorcees stated the reasons they dated after divorce was to prove something to themselves or to their ex-spouse, mainly that

they were moving on with their lives. Another 18% dated to lift their spirits or ease depression. While 11% of respondents reported dating for sex, men were more likely than women to report this (17% versus 4%).

Furthermore, Montenegro (2004) noted that midlife singles reported having participated in a variety of sexual activities, ranging from hugging and kissing (54%) to sexual intercourse (37%) and self-stimulation (39%) at least once per month. There was a wide gap between attitudes about acceptability and desirability of sexual intercourse, and when it occurred. Many more men than women (20% versus 2%, respectively) said sexual intercourse is acceptable on the first date. Montenegro found that men were more likely to state the frequency of sex is not enough (48%) than were women (35%).

According to Montenegro (2004), the majority of the respondents in the study did not want to remarry (38%) or were reluctant to remarry (14%). More women than men stated they did not want to remarry (43% versus 33%). The reasons given for not desiring to marry again included not wanting a bad marriage (65%), too much work to find someone else (19%), and having fun now (16%). For those looking for another mate, the desired features of a mate included a compatible personality (57%), having a good character (57%), and a good companion (54%). Regarding relationship quality and contact with their former spouses, Montenegro reported about a third (31%) of the divorcees had no contact with their former spouse, 27% were friendly afterwards, and 35% were not friendly but spoke occasionally to their ex-spouse.

Overall, midlife divorced individuals' perception of life after divorce varied depending upon the age of the respondents (Montenegro, 2004). Forty-year-olds were more worried about their finances, and noted this was the worst aspect of their divorces.

Respondents in their 50s were more likely to think of divorce as more difficult than losing a job or having a major illness. Individuals in their 50s reported the best aspect of divorce was that they did not have to deal with the complexities of another person. Divorcees in their 60s and 70s appreciated life the most. Individuals over 60 were more likely to value doing things for themselves and having their own identities (Montenegro).

Montenegro (2004) stated that the implications of this study highlight the increase of divorce in midlife and older individuals and the need to understand divorce and its impact on midlife and older individuals in particular. It is important to know the difficulties, concerns, and fears of midlife divorced individuals, so that legal and support systems can alleviate and inform this unique population of divorcees. Furthermore, she stated, “This study is an effort to heighten awareness, advance the dialogue, and inspire more research” (p. 5).

The limitations of Montenegro’s (2004) study include the sample size of less than 1,200 individuals, which limits the ability to generalize findings to all midlife and older adults. Sheperis, Young, and Daniels (2010) noted that a limitation of survey research is that individuals may misrepresent their true mental and emotional status, preferring instead to respond with positive responses rather than negative responses. Furthermore, it is possible that individuals experiencing positive emotions about their divorce self-selected to answer this survey, thus preventing an unbiased assessment of the full range of experiences of divorce at midlife.

### **The third age.**

Dierdre Bair (2007), in her book *Calling It Quits, Late-Life Divorce and Starting Over*, makes reference to “the third-age” (p. xvii), meaning life after divorce, when those

we once cared for have died or reached maturity. Although not every midlife divorce occurs after one's parents have died or one's children have grown and moved out of the family home, the third age represents a new kind of reality for midlife adults. According to Bair, midlife divorce potentially signals an opportunity for individuals to live differently and perhaps better than they had during their marriages.

Twenty or 30 years ago, midlife meant the final years before retirement and the beginning of slowing down, perhaps taking on the duties of a grandparent (Bair, 2007). To be without a spouse at midlife was more likely due to widowhood than to divorce (Coontz, 2005; Phillips, 1991). Now, divorce during midlife is common, and dating, new careers, vibrancy, and an active lifestyle may characterize contemporary midlife adults (Bair, 2007). This is partly due to ever-increasing lifespan and to changing social mores (Bair, 2007). Midlife women are more likely than their husbands to initiate divorce (Cohen, 2012; Hilton & Anderson, 2009; Montenegro, 2004; Sakranda, 2005).

Bair (2007) interviewed 126 men and 184 women who divorced after a long-term marriage. Bair's chronicle of midlife divorced individuals added depth and insight to the AARP (Montenegro, 2004) study of midlife divorce. Bair reported the inspiration for writing the book was sparked when she read the original AARP report. Wanting more information, she undertook the 300 interviews that comprise the book.

As in the AARP report (Montenegro, 2004), women in Bair's study were more likely than the men to initiate the divorce. The author chronicled the surprise of many of the male participants when their wives initiated divorce. Women who left their long-term marriages overwhelmingly stated they chose to end their marriages because of a lack of emotional connection with their spouse (Bair). The women in Bair's study often returned



to school, started a new business, or entered new relationships. Many participants of both genders admitted to having stayed married, despite their individual unhappiness, for the sake of their children (Bair).

Bair (2007) described the many ways in which adults changed lifestyles, searched for happiness, and made progress after divorce. She emphasized that each individual going through a divorce after a long marriage is unique, bringing with them a lifetime of experiences, expectations, and ways of coping that contributed to the experience of divorce (Bair). Some adults were content to live alone after divorce and relished the feeling of not having the responsibility of someone else's needs. Others in the study opted for community living, sharing a large house or renting out rooms in what used to be the family home. Still other individuals chose to live with their children, and a few to cohabitate without desire for another marriage (Bair).

Bair (2007) culminated her investigation by noting that even though all of her participants expressed feelings of failure, guilt, shame, and remorse over the lost potential of what could have been in their marriages, she also noted that the participants were remarkably resilient. Some took up new pursuits, such as ballroom dancing or renovating homes. A few turned their passions into new and fruitful businesses; others quickly repartnered (Bair). As time distanced them from their negative strong feelings, many felt a sense of relief and even joy, and anticipated embarking on new and happier times in their lives (Bair).

### **Characteristics of midlife divorced women.**

Sakraida (2005) contended that midlife for women is replete with transitions. If a woman has children, they are typically launched or soon to be launched, her aging

parents may require caretaking, and she is often experiencing the effects of aging herself (Sakraida). Hilton and Anderson (2009) wrote that the *empty nest*, after children have left home, can be fertile ground for a couple to reconnect in their marriage or sow the seeds of discontent as spouses realize they have grown irreversibly apart. Launching children can be a stressful time for families. Relationships with children change. Upon launching grown children, some midlife adults reappraise their lives and consider how they want to live the rest of it (Hilton & Anderson). A couple's relationship is vulnerable after immediate parenting duties have ceased. Furthermore, Hilton and Anderson emphasized that midlife women are more likely than men to leave an emotionally unsatisfying marriage.

Hilton and Anderson (2009) noted that divorce among midlife adults is rising, possibly due to increased longevity, women's greater financial independence, and a greater focus on personal happiness. There is emotional and financial cost to families when midlife women initiate divorce, and yet there is a deficit of research on divorce in midlife (Hilton & Anderson; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). The authors also stated there is little information about the characteristics of women who remain married and those who divorce in midlife (Hilton & Anderson). Divorce at midlife can affect a woman's financial future, her home, and her relationships with her family and social network (Hilton & Anderson).

### **Post-divorce adjustment of midlife women.**

Dare (2011) described the experiences of transitions in midlife women's lives, emphasizing that social science tells one story about midlife women, and the story contrasts sharply with actual women's experiences. Dare wrote, "What often are missing

from these accounts are women's own perspectives, along with a recognition of the social context of women's lives, as a way of more clearly understanding the challenges confronting women during midlife years" (p. 111).

Perrig-Chiello et al. (2015) contended that research on divorce after long-term marriage is a neglected topic. The authors undertook a study of individuals ( $N=308$ ) aged 45-65, who divorced after having been married an average of 25 years. Using exploratory latent profile analysis, Perrig-Chiello et al. determined the patterns of adjustment post-divorce after a long-term marriage. Results indicated that most individuals (49%) were average adaptors in terms of life satisfaction, depression, mourning, helplessness, and subjective health. Another large group of individuals (29%) were considered "resilients" (p. 398) because of their positive outcomes on standardized measures. Approximately 20% of research participants showed significant psychological problems, or maladjustment. The authors compared these outcomes to similar outcomes described by Heatherington and Kelly (2002). Overall, Perrig-Chiello et al. found a substantial degree of variability in adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage. Factors influencing adjustment included level of education, employment status, and financial status. As noted by other researchers, post-divorce financial concerns are some of the most significant stressors facing midlife divorced individuals (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Hilton & Anderson, 2009; Knox & Corte, 2007). Surprisingly, noted Perrig-Chiello et al., gender was not a significant factor in post-divorce adjustment. Those who did not adapt well were not a homogenous group, but in fact displayed diverse negative reactions and results to divorce.

Hilton and Anderson (2009) asserted divorce is rarely easy or pleasant at any age. For women who divorce after a long marriage, the effects of divorce can be devastating (Hilton & Anderson). Women who divorce at midlife, whether by choice or not, face a variety of challenges unique to their stage of personal development (Hilton & Anderson; Sakraida, 2005). Baum (2007) suggested that women who initiate divorce go through a process called “separation guilt” (p. 47). Baum asserted that separation guilt involves gender-specific and socially inculcated feelings of remorse towards the husbands they are divorcing that can possibly hinder post-divorce adjustment.

Gregson and Ceynar (2009) maintained that the impact of divorce on a midlife woman affects almost every aspect of her life, including relationships, finances, and identity. Perception of control over the post-divorce process is correlated with positive post-divorce adjustment (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Lloyd et al., 2014; Sakraida, 2008). Being the initiator of divorce is also related to better adjustment and perception of quality of life after divorce (Lloyd et al., 2014; Sakraida, 2008).

Lloyd et al. (2014) undertook a phenomenological study of post-divorce adjustment, and found that adjustment to divorce is a process imbued with both “transitions” (p. 447) and “changes” (p. 447). Furthermore Lloyd et al. stated, “The transition process began with mourning the loss of the marriage and later adjusting to life as an independent individual. This transformation required time. Most individuals required a two-year period or longer in which to adjust” (p. 447).

The transition through divorce is different for each individual (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Lloyd et al., 2014). It would be impossible in this review of literature to accurately describe or to name the countless experiences individuals encounter during the divorce

process, or to know with any certainty which of these contribute to or hinder a successful transition through divorce.

Complexities are the dynamics contributing to each person's experience of divorce. There are aspects of the process of divorce that cannot be told through quantitative data analysis. Race, social class, education, health, spirituality, personal experience, and relationships are intertwined in ways that uniquely contribute to each person's experience of divorce (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009).

### **New identity and lifestyle.**

Women expend a great deal of energy as they transition from a long-term marriage, through divorce, to become single again. Gregson and Ceynar (2009) wrote that many women transform their living spaces, their looks, careers, and patterns of behavior. Gregson and Ceynar emphasized, "Perceptions of self also change when marriages end" (p. 565). Individuals may perceive their divorce as a failure, and this perception might contribute to feelings of distress. Furthermore, women who have assumed the traditional role of nurturer or caretaker in a family may feel she has lost her identity after divorce. Furthermore, Gregson and Ceynar noted:

Divorced women experience conflict between the role they have been socialized to fill (that of wife) and the role they actually have – a role lacking in anticipatory socialization, a cultural script, role models, and support. Women navigate this process essentially on their own. (p. 566)

The lack of a cultural script not only allows for a wide range of freedom for women to recreate themselves after divorce, it also can leave a woman lost and uncertain about what her post-divorce identity should or could be. Gregson and Ceynar (2009)

reported that divorced women often found skills they did not know they had, and that their self-esteem increased as a result.

Not surprisingly, relationships with family and others change after divorce (Bair, 2007; Comstock-Benzick, 2013; Green, 2010; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Relationships that may once have been rewarding become disconnected, the most significant being that between the spouses (Bair, 2007; Comstock-Benzick, 2013). Bair (2007) noted that during the divorce process friendships change or are lost. Friends of the divorcing couple may feel threatened by the divorce and believe divorce to be a contagious phenomenon (Bair; Whitehead, 1996). New friendships and relationships are formed. Midlife divorcing women may have adult children, and divorce can affect the parent-child relationship (Bair; Greenwood, 2012). Much of the scholarly research on the children of divorce has focused on younger age children (Moon, 2011; Velez, Wolchik, & Tein, 2011), but divorce affects all children, regardless of age (Greenwood, 2012).

***Adult children.*** Greenwood (2012), in a qualitative study, interviewed 40 adult children of divorce (ACD), those whose parents divorced after they were 18 years of age. The study explored the parent-child bond to determine the effect of midlife divorce upon the relationship (Greenwood). All of the ACDs reported their relationships had changed with their parents; approximately half of the respondents felt the relationship had worsened and half felt the relationship had stayed the same or strengthened. ACDs whose parents had been divorced less than five years were more likely to report a negative relationship with one or both parents (Greenwood). Greenwood noted that although she expected the older range of ACD to be less affected by their parents' divorce, this was not the case. Despite their ages, all children, even as adults, are profoundly affected by

their parent's divorce. Greenwood found that the age of an ACD at time of parental divorce did not seem to influence the nature of the relationship.

***Other relationships.*** A common phenomenon among adults of all ages is the increase in cohabitation without marriage (Cherlin, 2009; Coontz, 2005; Finkel et al., 2013). In midlife adults, the intent to cohabit is often in lieu of, instead of, a precursor to marriage (Sassler, 2010). Furthermore, Upton-Davis (2012) noted a number of midlife adults choose a living arrangement termed "living apart together" (LAT) (p. 25). Couples forgo both marriage and cohabitation to achieve both autonomy and intimacy. The LAT arrangement challenges the norms of traditional coupled romantic relationships.

***Dating and sexuality.*** McWilliams and Barrett (2014) noted that women who divorce at midlife may find the social norms regarding dating and meeting romantic partners have changed considerably during the years since they were married. For instance, the exponential growth of online dating sites geared toward midlife and older adults has made it an important resource for midlife adults to make new acquaintances and form romantic relationships (McWilliams & Barrett). Online dating services such as eHarmony.com reported that between 2005 and 2010 its site became the most sought after venue for people over 50 seeking marital partners. Other sites, such as OurTime.com and SeniorPeopleMeet.com have advertised heavily to the over 50 demographic. Another site, match.com, reported its over 50 age group to be the fastest growing client sector (McWilliams & Barrett, 2014).

The Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN) was a longitudinal study undertaken to examine the health of women in their middle years (Cain et al., 2003). The goal of the study was to help health professionals understand how women's

midlife experiences affect health and quality of life during aging. The research, begun in 1994, interviewed more than 3,000 women from seven designated research centers every year until 2013.

Data collected by SWAN (Cain et al., 2003; Magon, Chauhan, Malik, & Shah, 2012) generated research on women's sexuality at midlife. Studies undertaken by Cain et al. (2003) and Magon et al. (2012) challenged previous ideas about middle-aged women's lack of interest in or desire for sex. Contrary to long-held beliefs, there is no clear association between menopause and a decline in sexual functioning. Many midlife women reported an interest in and appreciation of their sexuality, and were interested in maintaining a rewarding sex life.

*Spirituality.* Krumrei, Mahoney, and Pargamet (2009) emphasized that divorce can significantly alter the manner in which individuals experience their spirituality and religion. Helminiak (2001) differentiated between spirituality and religion, stating that spirituality refers to the personal beliefs, values, and meanings one attributes to life experience. Religion advances the values of spirituality and provides a formalized framework to inform how one should live (Helminiak).

Murray (2002) explained that people often turn to their faith, religious congregations, and spiritual leaders for guidance during difficult times. Divorce is usually considered a difficult time. Some individuals view divorce as a failure or a disappointment to God (Murray). The experience of divorce may challenge men and women's personal and spiritual beliefs. Individuals may find themselves at odds with what they feel is right for them and what their religion says about divorce (Murray). For example, in the Catholic faith, a divorced person may not remarry within the Catholic



Church without a church-approved annulment. Judaism (sect not specified) typically permits divorce only in cases of infertility (Murray).

Krumrei et al. (2009) studied the role of spirituality in adjustment to divorce. The authors examined the degree to which participants experience their divorces as a “sacred loss or desecration” (p. 374), made use of spiritual practices to progress through their divorces, and whether participants experienced spiritual conflict related to their divorces (Krumrei et al.). The authors found that participants ( $n=100$ ) who appraised their divorces as a sacred loss or desecration were also more likely to experience symptoms of depression. Adaptive spiritual coping, which included activities such as engaging in prayer, working with God to move through the divorce, and seeking comfort from clergy and congregation, were tied to greater spiritual growth and satisfaction following divorce. Krumrei et al. emphasized that divorce can disrupt an individual’s values and beliefs. Religion and spirituality can be a source of comfort and shelter during this time (Krumrei et al.). Religion can also be a source of distress, depending on how individuals view and cope with their spiritual beliefs (Krumrei et al.).

Ford (2001) asserted that divorce could be a transformative spiritual event with the power to enhance the life of the divorced individual. Ford used the term “spiritual divorce” (p. 5) was used to describe the potential to understand divorce as a way to improve an individual’s life. The pain, anguish, and confusion that occur during divorce are potentially transformative when taken as lessons for how to build a tranquil and fulfilling life after divorce. Transformation includes healing the relationship with one’s ex-spouse, if possible and feasible, accepting what is happening now, taking

responsibility for one's part in the divorce, choosing a new reality, and forgiveness (Ford).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided a review of the literature concerning the history of marriage and divorce in the United States, the role of individualism as it affected American marriages, the ideology of and myth of individualism, and midlife divorce in the United States. During the course of reviewing the literature, it became clear that mainstream publications did not routinely address the marriage and divorce trajectories of minority or marginalized populations, indigenous people, or alternative family configurations. Edited books, such as *In Joy and In Sorrow* (1991), which portrayed the histories of Southern and black antebellum life, provided some context for information outside of what is generally available.

The literature revealed the paradox of American attitudes about marriage. Americans want to be married and enter into marriage more often than any other Western society (Cherlin, 2009). The caveat to frequent American marriage is the desire for divorce should the marriage not meet personal goals of enrichment and self-fulfillment. The RCT perspective and the primacy of relationships in women's lives comprise the philosophical stance of the proposed research.

Midlife adults are currently divorcing in greater numbers than any other age group (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2012). Furthermore, the literature revealed that divorce is a distressing and unhappy event (Gregson & Ceynar, 2009). Most individuals emerge relatively unscathed from their divorce experience and manage to move on to new relationships and experiences (Heatherington & Kelly, 2002; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015).

Some individuals are devastated and maladjusted after divorce (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Using the lens of Relational Cultural Theory, the current research sought to discover the experiences and relational processes in midlife women that facilitate a successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS**

#### **Research Design**

The purpose of this research was to develop a grounded theory, which explicates the process of successful adjustment of midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage. The theory may aid practitioners who provide counseling to midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage. The research was conducted from a Relational cultural theory perspective.

Creswell (2007) stated that defining qualitative methods has become increasingly difficult as researcher's ideas and interpretations about the fluid nature of qualitative research remains dynamic (p. 36). Creswell agreed with Denzin and Lincoln's (2005) most recent description of qualitative research as an activity that places researchers squarely in the phenomenological realities of their research participants. Qualitative research is interpretive and evolving in that the researcher attempts to make sense of and apply theory to participants' meaningful experiences (Creswell). Krathwohl (2009) noted qualitative research is a bottom-up, inductive process, wherein the description of the research is in the words (p. 28). This researcher interviewed midlife women to learn the meanings they ascribe to their experiences and relationships after divorcing from a long-term marriage.

#### **Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory as a methodology for qualitative research was brought about in the 1960s, when Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss claimed that a systematic analysis of qualitative data could produce new theory (Charmaz, 2014, p. 7). The data are

words and statements made by participants about their experiences with a particular phenomenon. Grounded theory research is concerned with constructing theory around the important issues in people's lives (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). The emergence of grounded theory represented an epistemological shift from objective reality and the positivist paradigm of reality, to a relativist stance, in which no set reality is known. Rather, individuals construct meaning in their lives (Charmaz).

Grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is a qualitative research approach developed as an alternative to traditional, empirical, objective, and replicable experiments, the results of which are generalized to create theory. Grounded theory researchers generate theory by analyzing the data as collected. Data are collected by interviewing participants in a naturalistic setting and recording it for transcription. The transcribed data are coded and grouped into related concepts, or themes. The subsequent categories that emerge from the data become the theory generated from the research (Charmaz, 2014; Mills et al., 2006).

Glaser and Strauss (1967), and subsequent researchers (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) showed that systematic data analysis of qualitative research could generate new theory. According to Mills et al. (2006), "Grounded theory can be seen as a methodological spiral that begins with Glaser and Strauss' original text and continues today" (p. 26). Charmaz (2006/2014) listed several strategies researchers must undertake to produce grounded theory:

1. Conduct data collection and analysis simultaneously in an iterative process.
2. Analyze actions and processes rather than themes and structure.

3. Use comparative methods.
4. Draw on data (e.g. narratives and descriptions) in service of developing new conceptual categories.
5. Develop inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis.
6. Emphasize theory construction rather than description or application of current theories.
7. Engage in theoretical sampling.
8. Search for variation in the studied categories or process.
9. Pursue developing a category rather than covering a specific empirical topic. (p. 15)

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) shares many similarities to the grounded theory initiated by its founders and early proponents (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), such that it adheres to the inductive and comparative processes that allow theory to emerge from the data. Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Strauss, was the first researcher to explicitly declare her method of grounded theory as constructivist (Mills et al., 2006)

Constructivist grounded theory departs from traditional grounded theory in its flexibility and in the primacy placed on the reality co-created by the researcher and the research participant. Charmaz (2014) stated,

Social reality is multiple, processual (*sic*), and constructed, then we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an

inherent part of the research reality . . . Research acts are not given; they are constructed. (p. 13)

Mills et al. (2006) further noted that creatively written, rich text that provides insight into participant's attitudes and experiences is also a vital aspect of constructivist grounded theory.

Charmaz (2014) advocated the undertaking of constructivist grounded theory to underscore that knowing and learning are inextricable from social life. Specifically, the process of conducting interviews becomes the foundation upon which social bonds may develop. According to Charmaz, "Hence this approach attends to mutuality during the course of the interview and ways to build that mutuality" (p. 91). Furthermore, researchers bring the entirety of their selves to the research process. It is the acknowledgement of bringing one's entire self into the research process that contributes to reflexivity in the researcher. From Charmaz' perspective, reflexivity refers to

The researcher's scrutiny of the research experience, decisions, and interpretations in ways that bring him or her into the process. Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher's interests, positions, and assumptions influenced his or her inquiry. A reflexive stance informs how the researcher conducts his or her research, relates to the research participants, and represents them in written reports. (p. 344)

Other key elements of constructivist grounded theory research, as proposed by Charmaz (2014), included removing the power dynamic in the interview process by revealing the intent of the questions and stating how participants' stories impact theory. The researcher might be viewed by the participants as an expert, or as someone who

knows more than the participants themselves about the phenomena being examined.

According to Charmaz, researchers should not assume knowledge about the participants and the phenomena without verifying assumptions with the participants (p. 91).

Furthermore, Charmaz (2014) suggested that researchers find out the assumptions and perspectives held by participants as well as the meanings they attribute to the words they say. Researchers avoid preconceived notions about the material coming forth during the interview. Researchers use language common and familiar to the participants when framing interview questions. Charmaz encouraged researchers to “ask significant questions without forcing responses” (p. 96), and reminded them that implicit meaning is privileged. “Entering the participant’s world of implicit meaning is a privilege in which you may experience precious shared moments. Attending to them can infuse your nascent grounded theory with new analytic insights and increase its theoretical reach” (p. 98).

Researchers are urged to ask open-ended questions, using participants’ own words to form the questions, thus eliciting deep insight into their experiences. The constructivist methodology honors not only what is said, but what is left unsaid during the interview (Charmaz, 2014, p. 91). This research will be conducted by a woman who divorced at midlife after a long-term marriage. The experiences of my adjustment to divorce undeniably influence my attitude, knowledge, and perspective about divorce.

### **Participants and the Role of the Researcher**

Participants were divorced midlife women who were married for 20 or more years and who had been divorced for at least two years. Furthermore, they will have identified themselves as having successfully adjusted to divorce. Participants will be invited to join the study based on their response to a questionnaire to be posted in Qualtrics (Appendix



A). Once the criteria were met and a sufficiently heterogeneous group was obtained, participants were selected. Participants were interviewed until saturation was achieved. Saturation occurs when no new themes or categories arise from the interviews. Charmaz (2014) emphasized, “Categories are saturated when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (p. 213).

Participants were obtained through word of mouth with the researcher’s colleagues and through posts on social media such as Facebook and Twitter (See Appendix C). A heterogeneous sample of female participants was sought, including White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian women. To be eligible to participate in the research, women must have been married for 20 years or more before their divorces. The participants are not considered a vulnerable population, but would be referred to local low-cost or free counseling agencies if they experienced distress as the result of the interview process. Results of the study were made available to the participants.

Although women in midlife are two-thirds more likely than men to file for divorce, I did not know another female peer who initiated divorce during midlife as I had. Married at age 21, it seemed my husband and I grew up together. In hindsight, I realize that many aspects of my personality, goals, and dreams were as yet unrecognized at such a young age. We were married for 28 years, which was virtually my entire adult life.

Even as I wanted a divorce, I was not prepared for the sense of disconnection I experienced during the process of moving to a new city, negotiating the divorce settlement, and the period after the divorce was finalized. My former spouse could not understand why, even though we were going to divorce, I still wanted to talk to him.

People I had considered friends for 15 or 20 years, stopped calling me. I learned later that friends of the divorcing couple sometimes perceive divorce as contagious and discontinue contact with the spouse deemed the one at fault for the marriage dissolution (McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013).

My two adult daughters also were deeply affected by the announcement of my intent to divorce their father. I was surprised the news so devastated them. My eldest daughter and I became estranged. We had always been close and the rupture was very painful. It took time and the gentle counsel of a wise therapist to help us reconnect. My younger daughter and I remained in contact, discussed our emotions about the divorce, and moved gingerly forward through this difficult time. Although I was aware on some level that the relational schism created by divorce was affecting each of us in the family, it was only much later that I learned how heartbreaking and emotional this time period was for my daughters.

Even now, as my daughters and I have healed and reestablished a deepened connection, I know my children have been impacted in ways I can never fully appreciate. I will probably never know the full extent of the psychological pain they experienced. And yet, both have expressed to me their surprise at how happy both their father and I seem to be, some four years after the divorce.

As a newly single midlife woman, my world and possibilities expanded. The subsequent period in my life was one of unimagined polarities. Although I welcomed being single, I was fearful about the future. Would I remarry? Would I have enough money to survive? I had returned to school to begin my PhD studies three months before

I filed for divorce; managing the schoolwork and the range of new experiences I faced was both exhilarating and terrifying.

I began navigating the world as a midlife single woman. While reading through the divorce literature, I recognized myself in many studies of divorce. Gregson and Ceynar (2009) interviewed women for their qualitative study of women's post-divorce identity. Some of their respondents discussed the positive impact of changing domiciles and creating a space for themselves. I resonated with many of the stories told by the participants as they navigated smaller incomes, car repairs, and retirement funds. Like the women in Gregson and Ceynar's research, I experienced a greater sense of potential, freedom, and increased self-esteem. I began to believe I could be successful on my own. For the first time in my life, I lived alone, and it was extremely gratifying.

I also experienced a sort of delayed grief at the loss of my marriage. Almost three years post-divorce, I was able to look back on my long-term marriage and acknowledge the events and experiences that contributed to the dissolution of my marriage. I had a difficult time balancing my current happy and fulfilling life and at the same time, mourning the loss of my marriage. Talking with my mother, as well as reading the literature about the sadness that sometimes follows divorce (Baum, 2007) clarified that my feelings were normal. Having experienced the rupture of divorce, the disconnection that followed, and the gradual reconstruction of new and satisfying relationships, I became curious about how other women, who divorced after a long-term marriage, moved through the experiences and relational processes and successfully adjusted to life after their divorces.

## **Data Collection Procedures**

In the study, the researcher sought to identify a specific subset of a population for the research sample, therefore purposive sampling was employed to obtain research participants. According to Huck, Beavers, and Esquivel (2010), purposive sampling is used when “the nature of the research questions necessitates that certain criteria be used to determine who or what goes into the sample” (p. 1298). Research participants were recruited through colleagues, and through dedicated social media (Facebook and Twitter) accounts. Colleagues personally known to the researcher who are in regular contact with midlife divorced women, either professionally or personally (for example, attorneys, financial advisors, counselors, real estate brokers, clergy) were provided a script (Appendix B) which directed potential participants to email the researcher to obtain the link to a Qualtrics website. The script explained the research project, the purpose of the study, the criteria for participation, and how to contact the researcher.

Furthermore, the researcher obtained business cards printed with the researcher’s name, phone number, and research dedicated email (msomervillerresearch@gmail.com). Potential participants received several options to choose from when deciding whether or not to participate. The business cards were given to colleagues to distribute to potential participants as well as distributed by the researcher to potential participants. All potential participants were ultimately directed to the Qualtrics survey to determine eligibility. Informed consent was imbedded in the Qualtrics survey. Potential research subjects who indicated their interest in participating simultaneously were given their consent to participate.

The researcher generated regular posts on social media sites, Facebook and Twitter. Each post contained information about the purpose and population being sought for participation, and contained a link to the email address created specifically for this research. As potential participants emailed their interest in participating in the study, they were directed to the Qualtrics survey. At the Qualtrics site, potential participants were given an opportunity to complete a brief demographic survey to include questions to determine age, ethnicity, and length of marriage (Appendix A). Upon completion of the demographic survey, participants meeting the research criteria were identified.

Participants who met the criteria for participation were contacted, via email or telephone, within 48 hours of completion of the initial survey. At that time, the researcher and participant determined the date, time, and place of the interview. Participants were reminded that the interview would be tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researcher verbally reaffirmed that the participant understood and accepted this condition of participation. Participants who did not meet the criteria for participation were be emailed within 48 hours of completion of the initial survey thanking them for their interest in the research study and informing them that they had not met the research criteria.

All research participants had been divorced at least two years prior to the interview. Divorce literature has suggested that adjustment to divorce takes place in the first two years following divorce (Lloyd et al., 2014). Having been divorced for at least two years was a criterion for inclusion in this research study. Participant Lily had been divorced for two years and a month when she was interviewed, and participant Avery had

been divorced for 45 years. Other participants ranged in time since divorce from 2.5 years to 10 years.

Participants were limited to the Central and South Texas region, an area the researcher could reasonably reach by car within 1-3 hours to conduct the interviews. Interviews were held at a location convenient to the participant, such as the researcher's office, the participant's home or office, or wherever the research participant asserted she would feel comfortable speaking with the researcher for approximately one to one and one-half hours. If, at any time during the interview, the participant felt she did not wish to continue, she had the right to discontinue the interview immediately, without penalty. All participants willingly completed the interview process. To protect confidentiality, research participants were invited to select or have assigned a pseudonym to use as the researcher described the contents of the interview. To further protect confidentiality, names (such as family members) and identifying information were removed and replaced with descriptive words, such as "daughter," or "city." Participants were not compensated for their time, but they were informed that their narrative will contribute to the knowledge of midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage.

Interviews were audio recorded on the researcher's iPhone 6 mobile telephone, and immediately afterwards transferred to the researcher's password protected laptop computer. The laptop was stored in the researcher's locked office, for which only she had the key. Audio interviews were then erased from the researcher's telephone. The researcher personally transcribed each recorded interview using Microsoft Word 2008 for Mac. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher emailed the transcripts to the participants using the email addresses they had provided. Participants were asked to

review the transcripts for accuracy. Of the 10 participants, two provided corrections or clarifications, and these were added to their transcripts before data analysis.

The researcher personally transcribed all the interviews in order to analyze the data. The transcription process began after the initial interview and continued as all participants were interviewed. According to Charmaz (2014), transcribing as interviews are completed allows for theory building to begin immediately.

Although research participants identified themselves as having successfully adjusted to divorce and had been divorced for at least two years prior to the interview, there was the possibility that participants may have experienced discomfort when discussing aspects of their divorce. If any participant had experienced residual negative emotions following the interview, she would have been given information about low-cost or sliding scale counseling options in Austin through Plumeria Counseling, in San Antonio at the St. Mary's Family Center, and in Laredo, Texas, at the Texas A&M International University Community Stress Center.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The purpose of this study was to generate a grounded theory of midlife women's successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage of 20 years or more. The researcher interviewed 10 participants, and inquired about the experiences and relational processes that led to successful adjustment to divorce. The transcripts generated from participants' responses were analyzed for common themes and subthemes. In keeping with Constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), the researcher engaged in initial and focused coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling for saturation, and sorting of categories. The researcher also employed the use of reflexivity, the process of

acknowledging the researcher's unique role as a co-participant and co-creator of the research experience.

The data analysis began with the first transcript. Using initial coding with gerunds, the researcher reviewed each transcript, line-by-line. Charmaz (2014) advocated coding with gerunds because it brings the researcher closer to the data, stimulates making comparisons between data, and helps identify emerging links in the data (p. 121). Using the process of constant comparison, the researcher began to identify the most commonly occurring themes and subthemes across participants' transcripts. Iterative and recursive examination of the data continued as the researcher identified similarities and differences, until no new themes emerged. Focused coding was undertaken to support the work of constant comparison to determine the adequacy and conceptual strength of the initial codes. Strong focused codes became conceptual categories, but these categories remained tentative throughout the research process to account for new data and the constant comparison process. The researcher also employed Constructivist grounded theory techniques of memo writing, theoretical sampling, sorting, abductive reasoning and saturation. When no new categories or concepts emerged from the data, the researcher deduced the themes were saturated, and concluded data collection.

Following the protocol suggested above, the researcher was able to generate an integrative statement to answer the original research question. The theory also generated recommendations for counselors to use when providing services to midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage.



**Initial coding.**

The process of initial coding continues the interaction the researcher established with the participant and moves the interaction into analytic space (Charmaz, 2014, p. 109). During initial coding, the researcher read the transcription of the interview, line by line, to identify and categorize short pieces of data, attaching a brief description thereto. Concrete statements in the data became analytic descriptions of participants' experiences. Charmaz (2014) emphasized that "Grounded theory coding fosters studying actions and processes" (p. 113).

The logic of coding in grounded theory is foundation for the emergent theory. Charmaz (2014) noted, "Through coding, you define what is happening in the data and begin to grapple with what it means" (p. 113). Furthermore, "by careful attending to coding, you begin weaving two major threads in the fabric of grounded theory: generalizable theoretical statements that transcend specific times and places and contextual analyses of actions and events" (p. 113). Charmaz suggested the following for conducting initial coding: delve into the data early searching for analytic ideas worth pursuing and remain open to all possible theoretical directions suggested by the data (p. 114).

Charmaz (2014) cautioned researchers to recognize the crucial role language plays in constructing codes for the data. Specifically, participants use their words and meanings of language to convey their experiences. Participant's words are embodied with the meanings they attribute to their words, and researchers must "examine the hidden assumptions in our use of language as well as that of our participants" (p. 115). Also, Charmaz asked researchers to understand that language is not neutral; researchers will

themselves imbue the language they choose to describe participant's experiences with their own meanings. Consistent, iterative, and comparative interaction with the data by reading and rereading interview transcripts, adding subsequent interviews to the data, is what helps researchers understand the "tacit" (p. 115) meaning of participant's words. Charmaz explained, "Grounded theory can bring you back to some research participants while going forward with fresh ideas to check with new participants" (p. 115).

### **Focused coding.**

Charmaz noted, "Focused coding is the second major phase in coding" (p. 139). Focused coding is the process of identifying the most frequent codes in the initial codes and testing these against large batches of data. The codes researchers identify as having analytic strength are then raised to tentative categories to develop. More conceptual in nature than the initial codes, focused codes are not only necessary to facilitate the data analysis; they move the researcher closer to the emerging theory. Charmaz emphasized, "After you have established some strong analytic directions through your initial coding, you can begin focused coding to synthesize, analyze, and conceptualize larger segments of data" (p. 139). As researchers consider both initial and focused codes, the two codes begin to account for each other. An indication the researcher needs to go back to the data, is if focused codes do not come forth from the initial codes.

Focused codes should help determine the strength and viability of the initial codes. The initial codes with more strength become focused codes, which in turn, become tentative categories. Charmaz (2014) emphasized that researchers should continuously move back and forth, in an iterative manner between all levels of coding, engaging in

memo writing as well. Charmaz presented a list to help define whether or not a code can move from initial to focused:

- What do you find when you compare your initial codes with data?
- In which ways might your initial codes reveal patterns?
- Which of these codes best account for the data?
- Have you raised the codes to focused codes?
- What do your comparisons between codes indicate?
- Do your focused codes reveal gaps in the data? (p. 140-141)

#### **Theoretical memo writing.**

Charmaz (2014) described memo writing as a pivotal activity that occurs between data collection and the completion of the research draft. Furthermore, “memo-writing is a crucial method in grounded theory because it prompts researchers to analyze their data and to develop their codes into categories early in the research process” (p. 343). During the interview process, Charmaz noted that researchers may observe participants’ overt and nonverbal behaviors, hear the intonations of their speech, and take note of the interview settings. These observations are important and can add to the richness and completeness of analysis. Charmaz suggested the use of theoretical memos as analytic ideas occur. Theoretical memoing is the process of writing down observations made during the interview. Charmaz instructed researchers to write about observations so they may be checked and verified later against the data.

#### **Theoretical sampling.**

To ensure that the emerging theory is a viable and true representation of the phenomenon being studied, researchers engage in theoretical sampling. Charmaz (2014)

emphasized that theoretical sampling is undertaken to gather more information about the categories that seem to emerge from initial and focused coding, and to develop the properties of the categories until no new properties emerge. The process of “seeking and collecting pertinent data to elaborate and refine categories in your emerging theory” (p. 192) is the task of theoretical sampling.

Charmaz (2014) cautioned against confusing theoretical sampling with gathering data. The difference is that with theoretical sampling, one is aiming to develop explicit theoretical categories, not to describe empirical themes of the experiences gathered (p. 199). Theoretical sampling along with corresponding memo writing directs researchers to identify lacunae in the emerging categories.

The benefits of conducting theoretical sampling, according to Charmaz (2014), are as follows:

- To delineate the properties of a category
- To check hunches about categories
- To saturate the properties of a category
- To distinguish between categories
- To clarify relationships between emerging categories
- To identify variation in a process (p. 212).

### **Sorting.**

As theoretical sampling is taking place, categories become saturated, so that no new data emerge (Charmaz, 2014). The categories are then sorted into “an integrated theoretical statement” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 193). Charmaz (2014) made clear to researchers that the process of sorting does not take place in a linear fashion. Each time

new data are obtained, researchers compare to previously established categories and focused codes, refining and comparing to the new data (Charmaz). In this fashion, the process of obtaining a theory grounded in the data is always iterative.

### **Abductive reasoning.**

Charmaz (2014) indicated that abduction in grounded theory is the process of imaginative reasoning. Its place in grounded theory is accounted for by the inferences, conjectures, and reasoning researchers make about their data. According to Charmaz, “Abduction begins during inductive inquiry when a researcher discovers a surprising finding that neither fits the pattern of other findings nor can be theoretically explained in the same way” (p. 200). Furthermore, “Grounded theory relies on *reasoning – making inferences* – about empirical experience” (p. 201, emphasis in original).

Charmaz (2014) described that abductive reasoning begins with a “mental leap” (p. 201), and continues with a return to data and perhaps with gathering more data. Accordingly, “new theoretical interpretation must fit the surprising empirical findings. Thus, abduction builds on the pragmatist tradition of problem solving and supports the notion of indistinct borders between scientific discovery and justification” (Charmaz, p. 201).

### **Saturation.**

Charmaz (2014) discussed how researchers know when to stop gathering data and which criteria researchers employ to determine when to end data collection. Saturation of categories is one method of knowing when to stop data collection. Sometimes budgetary constraints, time, researcher experience, or lack thereof, determine termination of data collection (p. 214). Charmaz noted, “Categories are ‘saturated’ when gathering fresh data

no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories” (p. 213). Saturation requires looking within and between the categories for comparison, then noting where comparisons have led the analysis. New directions should be pursued, and new conceptual relationships considered before researchers can claim saturation.

Charmaz emphasized that data analysis is not a “seamless” process. Significant categories may not emerge until late in the research process, but by continuously returning to the data, a rich and fully formed theory emerges:

A constructivist approach places priority on the studied phenomenon and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data . . . The theory depends on the researcher’s view, it does not and cannot stand outside of it. (p. 239)

## CHAPTER IV

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this chapter, the researcher will present the narratives of the 10 research participants and follow with the major themes that emerged from the data. All participants resided and were interviewed in south central Texas. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Furthermore, ancillary identifiers were removed or changed. Table 1 describes the participants' demographics.

Table 1

*Participants' Demographics.*

<b>Participant Name</b>	<b>Age Now</b>	<b>Years Married</b>	<b>Years Divorced</b>	<b>Divorce Initiated by Participant? Yes – No – Both</b>
Mary Jo	49	24	3	Yes
Hazel	52	23	3	Yes
Augusta	62	25	10	Yes
Judith	56	32	2	Both
Lily	58	34	2	No
Avery	91	23	44	Yes
June	57	27	3.5	Yes
Anabelle	57	20	5	Yes
Marguerite	55	30	3	Yes
Ella	58	23	4	Yes

#### **Participant Narratives**

##### **Mary Jo.**

At the time of the interview, Mary Jo was in her late 40s and identified as Caucasian. Mary Jo initiated her divorce after 22 years of marriage and has been divorced

for three years. At the time of her divorce, Mary Jo's two children, a daughter and a son, were 9 and 15 years of age, respectively. When asked about her successful adjustment to divorce, she spoke first about the reason for her divorce.

Mary Jo stated that throughout her former marriage her former spouse had been addicted to drugs, and remains so despite numerous attempts at rehabilitation, including more than one admission to a residential treatment center. Mary Jo shared that as soon as she made the decision to divorce, she moved the process along very quickly. She explained,

In the beginning, I remember people asking me how I was doing. We were together 24 years and we divorced because he refused to get any kind of help because he didn't feel he had a problem. . . . It basically handed me a reason. There was no ambiguity, which was really beneficial. The one thing that I did that I've patted myself on the back for, many, many times, is, I filed [for divorce] and then moved things along very, very quickly. And the reason why that was important is because we divorced before he really had a chance to figure out what was going on.

Mary Jo stated she wanted to move the divorce process quickly because she had witnessed her Mother endure a terrible divorce. She explained,

My Mom went through a horrible, horrible, "War of the Roses" kind of divorce. . . . It dragged for years and years. I knew just from watching her not to do that. So, thank God, I learned from watching her.

Mary Jo would tell those who asked how she was doing during the divorce process that she felt three emotions:



What I would tell people in the beginning when they asked how I was doing; there's really the three F's that I felt: fear, fury, and freedom. . . . In the beginning, the fury and the fear are overshadowing. Over time they lessen, and then the freedom part comes through.

Mary Jo elaborated on the "three F's" and their meaning. She discussed fury first by sharing how angry she felt when her spouse began posting his profile to online dating sites before they divorced. She said, "He went online immediately, and started dating. And it was painful." She was furious about his "lack of concern for mine or the children's feelings and about his self-absorption." Mary Jo explained she also feared her former spouse bringing another woman into their children's lives who would be a bad influence on them and added, "Fear, like, is there gonna be some woman now raising my kids?" She also feared the effect the divorce would have upon the children, "How is this going to affect the kids?" She also feared her husband's mental instability, his anger, and what she termed his "sociopathy." Explaining further, Mary Jo said, "I was really worried. He's so unstable . . . He bought a gun, and he's never had a gun before. I didn't know if he was going to come shoot me in my sleep."

Toward the end of her divorce, Mary Jo described freedom from her spouse's "constant criticism and passive aggression." Mary Jo believed her successful adjustment came about by focusing on the freedom she experienced as a result of her divorce. Mary Jo gave an example of the criticism she endured during her marriage. She recalled,

Like for example, he's a trained chef. He was a chef at the [exclusive hotel]. He graduated from [prestigious culinary school]. Fantastic chef . . . So one of the things I wanted him to do during our marriage was to teach me how to cook. He

never would. He refused. Absolutely refused. So, what I would do, during various parts of our marriage, I would attempt to teach myself. And then he would walk in and criticize me. Or laugh at me. Laugh and point. I remember that. I would put up with it or I would get mad, my feelings would be hurt . . . or he would do this thing like brush me aside and take over. But that's just an example. He did that like so-o-o-o many places throughout the day. So many areas.

Mary Jo declared her decision to divorce came about very quickly. She felt betrayed when, after several attempts over 20 years by her spouse to stay clear of drugs, she discovered drug paraphernalia in his possession after their nine-year-old daughter declared, "Daddy smells like pot." Mary Jo continued,

What he'd been doing periodically is, I would catch him using, he would go to rehab, and we would do that cycle, and then he would declare himself clean, and what finally was the end of it was that he admitted to me that he'd never been clean.

About the final betrayal, Mary Jo explained, "What that did was that it basically handed me a reason [to divorce]. There was no ambiguity, which was really beneficial, really useful . . . I filed and then moved things along very, very quickly."

Mary Jo laughingly recalled how difficult it had been to make friends while she was married. She shared that

There's this whole population of divorced women in their 40's . . . they're dying to get out and do fun things and I've had no problem making friends, which is weird 'cause for 24 years I had a lot of trouble finding friends.

Mary Jo described how friendships sustained her through all phases of her divorce. About her growing number of friends, she stated that some “came back into the fold, thrilled to find me by myself.” She further explained that her network of friends grew exponentially after she joined a nondenominational divorce support group. She added, “those women were awesome. We would share our stories and we became very bonded.”

Mary Jo shared she did not have a large family and was an only child. She added that her father “passed away some years ago” and that she was not close to her mother. About extended family she said, “I have a couple of gay uncles in Dallas, and [during the divorce] they were hugely wonderful and supportive. They’ve been awesome.”

Mary Jo spoke at length about her two children. She explained that the divorce took her children by surprise, even though they knew their father had substance abuse problems. She recalled,

They didn’t blame me for getting a divorce, *but* they saw their Dad start circling the drain and they got angry with me for not stepping in to somehow save him. . . . My son, he was affected the most, because he’s been let down. His role model, you know, the man who’s supposed to be guiding him, is less mature than he is.

Mary Jo believed her son suffered the most from the divorce. Although she is the custodial parent, her son wanted to live with his father, and Mary Jo agreed to allow the move. According to Mary Jo, the arrangement did not go well, lasting only three months, due to the father’s active substance abuse.

I think my son was just shocked at how he wasn’t a Dad, he was just this stoner buddy, who happened to own a house. And he was very disappointed. He was

very let down. He was looking for a strong role model . . . and so there was a lot of rage in him . . . it came out fast and furious . . . he moved back in with me . . . and the rest of the year was just horrible with him.

Mary Jo believed her daughter to be resilient during the divorce process, and recalled,

What she told me was that she didn't know I was strong until I divorced . . . so there seems to be a lot of respect there, from her, that I didn't have before. A lot of disrespect toward her Dad, but she seems to actually be doing ok.

The family sought counseling for a brief time, shortly after the divorce, which Mary Jo stated was hugely beneficial. She explained,

That therapist did amazing things. She made us all realize several things. One, [son] needs to move back in with me . . . she got [son] to realize that. Another time, it was just [former spouse] and I [in the therapy session], where I was trying to get him to comprehend the awfulness of what he did and how it affected the kids and she [the therapist] stops me and says, "Mary Jo, he doesn't think anything is wrong with him. You're not getting that." Right in front of him! And I looked at him, and he was like, "No, I don't." That moment was worth a thousand therapy sessions, right there. Mind blowing . . . Oh, there's no improvement here. That was huge.

The children have regular contact with their paternal grandparents, something Mary Jo encourages. Overall, Mary Jo believes the relationship now with her children is strong and healthy.

Mary Jo has not dated since her divorce and stated she was not interested in dating, partnering, or remarrying. She explained that her resistance to dating again has been one of the most surprising aspects of adjusting to divorce. Mary Jo stated, “I thought I’d be right back out there, But I have just not been able to take that leap.” Mary Jo attributed her continued abstention from dating to a vibrant and large friend group.

Despite being the initiator of her divorce, Mary Jo disclosed feeling a sense of sadness afterwards. Mary Jo said, “It was the realization of who he is. I really felt like I was dumbstruck at this person. And looking back, you know, over photographs, all of it, he really did put on quite a mask.”

About her life after divorce, Mary Jo expressed a sense of freedom, new experiences, and improved quality of life. “It not just new relationships, it’s new experiences. Life really does seem so much better. I feel free.” She emphasized that for years she harbored resentment and outrage toward her husband’s behaviors. After her divorce, Mary Jo recognized,

It’s so wonderful to be living a life where that [her divorce] is not my topic of conversation. I mean, things are just moving forward now. More, you know, positive. It’s a very different mindset . . . it’s not just my relationships, it’s my whole outlook.

Mary Jo emphasized that moving the divorce along quickly allowed her to begin her new life. Also, she noted that relationships formed with the women in her divorce group helped her adjust quickly and positively. Furthermore, she noted that letting go of her anger at her former spouse was a crucial aspect of her successful adjustment. “I have let my anger go.” Furthermore, Mary Jo emphasized how angry she was at men after her

divorce, but revealed how her stance has changed, “It’s not just one gender. I was on a ‘men suck’ spree for a long time, and I’m now realizing . . . women can actually be pretty awful too and it’s really just human beings.”

At the end of the interview, Mary Jo was invited to name the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce. She stated the following,

I think the most significant factor was that I moved the divorce along so quickly. It didn’t drag out. And as a result, I feel like I got a chance to start my new life pretty quickly. That is huge. And then the other factor was getting in this divorce group and finding women, like minded women, going through the same thing.

**Hazel.**

At the time of her interview, Hazel was in her early 50s and identified as Caucasian. Hazel initiated her divorce after 23 years of marriage, and has been divorced for three years. Hazel has two children, a son and a daughter, who were 18 and 16 years of age, respectively, at the time of her divorce. When asked about her successful adjustment to divorce, she began by describing the circumstances that brought about her decision to divorce.

Hazel described being “unhappy for a long time” before making the decision to divorce. Hazel revealed that her spouse had a history of addiction and mental instability. She explained,

There were a lot of concerns for me about how to strategically manage the divorce based on what was happening with him, with his addictions, with his mental state. I really had to focus on . . . the process of divorce.

She filed for divorce within a month of his return from a second failed attempt to complete treatment at a residential center. Her spouse's return from treatment coincided with Hazel discovering his infidelity. She stated, "There was infidelity, he knew he was in the wrong. So strategically, I kind of knew . . . let me do this this way because of what was going on for him."

About the process of divorce, Hazel noted,

When we divorced, did it on a very concerned effort for finances, and concerned effort for the kids . . . we didn't hire attorneys . . . we hired one attorney and we processed through all of our financials . . . We even brought in our financial advisor to look at everything in detail to break it up.

Hazel described packing her husband's clothes as soon as she discovered his infidelity. She stated,

I had him move out immediately. I actually got him an apartment. I packed his stuff, moved him out . . . I think it was a good shift to kind of get that distance and break that tension within the household.

Hazel stated her relationships, specifically with her mother, a supervisor at work, and professional colleagues sustained her during the divorce process. She recalled, "They were there for me, they listened to me. I called them frequently. I didn't really rely on my girlfriends, because of that relationship with couples. Many of the relationships [with other married couples] I had at that time just ended."

Hazel described the disruption of relationships at the time of her divorce. She was married to a prominent and well-known member of a small community. She served on the local hospital board and on the board of directors for several charity organizations.

When news of her impending divorce was made public, the professional relationships dissolved.

Hazel recalled, “It was surprising to me in terms of relationships with professionals . . . they completely cut me off. There was no communication.” In the end, Hazel concluded that although hurtful at the time, the abruptness in the ways her relationships with others doing charitable board work ended, was a signal for her to move forward with her life. She noted,

It was part of the resiliency to just go forward and completely close that chapter in my life. I was pretty angry at everyone for backing off completely, and not being supportive at all . . . I don’t have any communications with anyone there anymore. And it’s good, because I feel like life has completely taken a 360 turn.

Though she was active in the community, Hazel described that over time, she lost her sense of self. As the wife of a physician, her identity revolved around his profession and with “keeping up appearances.” About six years before her divorce, Hazel returned to school to pursue a master’s degree in the mental health field. About how her education related to her coping with the divorce, Hazel stated,

You lose that relationship with yourself . . . going back and getting my master’s was probably the best thing I ever did. It was instrumental in my wellbeing and my mental health – through this divorce.

After her divorce, Hazel recalled she was able to have a lot of introspect and reflection and spending time working on myself, doing different things. Doing a lot of self-care was really important for my



relationship with myself . . . And now . . . being in this community, and having a private practice has been the most transforming overall.

Hazel contended that she had long wanted to move from the small town in which she lived to [name of city], where she had always wanted to live. “It was kind of like a dream come true for me . . . I was excited about moving.”

Hazel reported feeling both sad and excited about leaving the home she and her husband had built together, 18 years before the divorce. “I didn’t like living there, so I was excited about moving . . . I think at the time it was sad, but there was also that level of excitement.”

Hazel noted she made some plans before she filed for divorce. In her words, I did a lot of strategic planning before I filed for divorce too. I started looking at schools first, and I even started looking at purchasing things, how I was going to divide out what I needed. Even started that process of distancing myself from you know, things . . . all of the possessions you have in a 20-year marriage. I really started that process of shifting away.

Hazel endorsed feelings of relief at leaving her old life behind, including material possessions, stating, “I don’t have to deal with all this crap anymore!”

She also described being worried for her children’s emotional wellbeing, and said, It was hard for them . . . I offered them the opportunity for the choice, but I really pushed for them to come with me . . . not because of . . . the child support, it was more along the lines that he wasn’t mentally stable. I really was concerned for their safety, for the mental wellbeing to stay in that environment. So, they were

pretty on-board with leaving, they were on board for starting a new school, and kind of rebuilding, reworking things.

Hazel also reflected on her approach to moving forward,

One of the most important things I did for my wellbeing was to start the process of EMDR. I think I did that within three weeks of finding out about the infidelity . . . I really did a lot of reprocessing, a lot of clearing out. I cut all my hair off . . . I did a lot of transforming even before we did the major split.

Initially, after the divorce, Hazel stated she and her former spouse were able to “be cordial, for the sake of the children.” She added, “We attempted to stay grounded with the kids, to continue to communicate. He would come to [name of city] periodically and we would go out to dinner with the kids together.”

Hazel pointedly noted that as soon as she became romantically involved with a new partner, her former spouse became verbally abusive. She explained, “The minute I started seeing someone, that’s when the shit hit the fan.”

Hazel’s response to her former spouse’s verbal abuse, was to completely cut off their communication. She noted her former spouse was

constantly triangulating the kids and I realized how toxic it had become, and I realized I had to completely cut him off . . . Following that shift, and that move, was probably the most difficult for me, because I knew that there was no going back in our relationship.

When Hazel was asked to share more on the current status of communication with her former spouse, she explained,

“I sometimes hope that we can go back to being cordial . . . that we can communicate and talk in a very adult-like manner, but I don’t know. It’s okay if it doesn’t happen.” Hazel explained her decision to her children, encouraging them to continue their own relationships with their father. “I gave the kids a choice too . . . You have a choice to make in your relationship with your father. This maybe isn’t the season to have a relationship with him.”

Hazel described that the children had difficulties managing their relationships with parents who could no longer be around each other. “I never had any idea there would be this much collateral damage, especially on their relationships.”

In a similar vein, she remarked,

I think the relationship my daughter has with her dad is probably the most volatile and the most damaged from all this. My son seems to have kind of suppressed a lot that’s happened. He doesn’t dwell on it, but she does, and I think that’s been the most difficult for me, as I’ve completely cut my ties with him and my relationship with him. It’s been hard to support them in their relationship with him [their father].

Hazel shared that she knew her relationship with her former spouse would change, but had no idea what it would look like after the divorce. Hazel stated, “There’s no way to know beforehand. And the cards kind of fall as they will. So, their [her children’s] relationship [with their father] is still very much a struggle. They still come to me, especially she [daughter] does.”

Hazel spoke of the relationship with her mother as one that sustained her during the divorce process. Hazel stated, “My mother was very supportive. She would listen and

give me perspective a lot. That was a very important relationship.” A supervisor from Hazel’s Master’s program served as another source of support. “She [supervisor] just sat back and listened, which is all I needed was for her to listen.” Aside from these relationships, Hazel said she isolated herself from the previous charity board organizations. “I didn’t want the dirt to get out . . . plus, the one who files is always the bad guy. So I was the bad guy.” She found “support and friendship” among her mental health professional colleagues.

Hazel described feeling grief over the loss of her marriage prior to filing for divorce. “That loss and grief was really based on the whole perspective of infidelity. So, that was the bulk of the grief, and I think I processed through it pretty fast, because I had been unhappy for a long time.”

Hazel described how moving to a new city helped to resolve the “sense of loss.” She said,

It felt like it was clear. I felt like I had really cleaned out, you know, all the tears, everything. And yeah, I think the loss and grief of it, there’s still little parts of it, because it’s that future, that image of living with someone for the rest of your life, you know? Just the dream, the end of that dream.

During the divorce process, Hazel shared how her spirituality, “transformed into something stronger. I still have a strong faith and spirituality, and I really want to explore more of the Buddhist and Hindu traditions.”

About new relationships and dating, Hazel explained that she wanted to take her time after divorce before beginning to date. “I was like, I am not getting into another relationship, I just want to focus on myself, focus on the kids . . . there was probably

about 8-12 months where there was no love interest.” About her decision to date after divorce, Hazel said,

I think for me it was about just meeting the right person. I started going out on dates, friends of friends . . . just going out for coffee . . . going out for a drink, or to listen to music together . . . I got to a point, hey, this is kind of nice.

At the time of the interview, Hazel shared how she was dating a man she had met two years ago. She added, “This was a great guy, this was a healthy relationship, there are no expectations, it’s great. I felt comfortable. My kids like him. He does not try to parent them.”

Hazel said she has “zero interest” in remarrying at this time. She receives spousal support from her former husband, which would be discontinued if she were to remarry. Hazel also believed that her stake in her family’s property could be jeopardized if she married.

Additionally, she noted, “I guess some financial advantages to not remarrying. Sounds kind of shallow, but I just feel like I’m in the place where, the institution of marriage has a whole different meaning for me now.”

Hazel discussed her regret about not paying more attention to finances when she was married. Hazel stated, “I failed in my relationship with money. I think my relationship with money is a bit skewed and icky.” As she disclosed her worries about being able to afford things and how she will pay for her daughter’s wedding, Hazel added, “That’s an area I feel like I kind of failed a little bit. I hope I can help my daughter have a better relationship with money.”

Hazel explained the factors important to her successful adjustment to divorce,

Probably one of the most influential factors is the self-care piece. That was so important for me to reground myself . . . I think too, getting into a healthy relationship with someone who was encouraging, who supported me, who helped me, who gave me that confidence again, along with that self-care piece, for me to go, yeah, I can do this totally.

Hazel ended the interview by speaking of her new vision for going forward, and shared, “when I look at my life, and my journey ahead of me, it’s so exciting, because I can do anything. I can go anywhere. I don’t have to fulfill the pathway with this person [former spouse].”

**Augusta.**

At the time of the interview, Augusta was in her early 60s and identified as Caucasian. Augusta initiated her divorce after 25 years of marriage and has been divorced for 10 years. Her daughters were 18 and 13 at the time of the divorce. About her divorce, Augusta stated that her successful adjustment

started during the divorce when I had to. I couldn’t believe my body could hold that much anger and pain, and I thought, why is this happening to me? . . . I had to challenge myself. I’ve told myself a million times, everything happens for a reason.

Augusta explained that, although she filed for the divorce, she struggled with acceptance. She recalled,

It took me about two weeks to accept the fact that this was happening for a reason. That there is something out there calling me to do something else . . . I

had to think, what is it that I'm being called to? And that was a whole journey in itself.

As Augusta discussed her process of acceptance and adjustment, she said, I was doing so much out of habit and rote, and the enabling I started, that I fell into, just by being a mom and wife. As I was letting go of these dysfunctional behaviors, I would say, "Well, what do you want to do then?" . . . This was a year long process, but it really helped me form myself.

Augusta characterized herself by saying, "I really need people. I'm very social."

She explained how she began to form new relationships during the divorce process,

I immediately started looking for divorce recovery groups. And also a club to join . . . there was nothing out there that I liked and I thought, well, I'm just going to start my own. And started [Name] Club, which is eight years old now, and from my group, others spread out. I like to think I was a big help for other adult singles to help them get a life back.

As a component of the social club, Augusta stated,

I got a bunch of new friends, and a lot of satisfaction . . . there's a lot of friendship groups that formed, and a lot of relationships that formed. I used to tell people, it's not a dating group! But I've learned that if you put men and women together with booze, and have a good time, eventually they find each other. They do.

Augusta spoke about her spouse and the nature of their relationship before she initiated the divorce. "He was very introverted. We balanced each other, obviously. And he wouldn't go out with me, we never had a party, we never had people in. When we were invited someplace, I'd go alone." Later, after the divorce, she found out he had been

diagnosed with Asperger's. She said, "Oh, had I only known! I wouldn't have had so many expectations."

In the same vein, she recalled, "It was several years that we knew things were falling apart." Augusta described the signs that indicated her marriage was failing, and added,

I felt like a kept woman, because I used to control all the money . . . I used to do the bills and everything. And after awhile he took the bills away and he said, 'Oh just let the girl at the office do this . . . you don't have to do this. And I thought great, this is awesome. Well, after awhile I was clueless.

Augusta recalled that at some point during her marriage,

I was trying to get account of our money, because the only thing I ever asked him to do was pay off the house. I wanted it paid off . . . He kept saying yeah, yeah, yea. I said, well then, lets file that document from the lender and put it away in the safe. I never got it back. I thought you know, little clues like that, like what's going on? And it was two years, and he [spouse] was putting me off . . . excuse after excuse. Well, one day I went down to the office, and he [spouse] had gotten a new receptionist. And I said, "Hi, I'm Augusta, and my CPA wants a copy of our investments." She said, "Sure," and copied the whole chart. And that's where I found hundreds of thousands of dollars being withdrawn. And I thought, "Wow, where did that go?" So that started . . . it took a year to investigate."

Augusta recalled that she spent months covertly investigating the discrepancies in the couple's finances. "I thought, something's going on here, and it's not good. And so I filed for divorce." Furthermore, she was flabbergasted to discover her husband's secret



life, “He was never home anyway. He loves to hunt and fish and workout . . . And I never suspected a woman. He kept that quiet.” After discovering her spouse’s deception, Augusta said she realized,

This isn’t the kind of relationship I want. Cause he wouldn’t talk to me. And it’s funny because he’s a photographer. And he took thousands of pictures . . . of his fish . . . his hunting buddies, a few of the kids, but none of me. Not one. And I thought, “This is so weird.”

She described finding letters and documents in Spanish [spouse was fluent in Spanish], “I found out he has another wife and child in Costa Rica, and another child in Argentina.”

Augusta described how she packed her husband’s clothing the day he was served with the legal documents initiating the divorce. Augusta stated, “I surprised him by filing . . . and while he was being served, I’m downstairs putting his suitcase that I packed for him in his girlfriend’s car, knowing that’s where he would go.” Her lawyer advised her to be “polite and cooperative” during the divorce process. Augusta recalled,

I tried not to show any emotion, but I was deeply, deeply, deeply hurt. Cause every time I’d find something . . . I’d reel. And I’d get in my car, and I’d slam it, and charge 100 miles an hour, and really just scream, it was anything to get this feeling out of me. It was awful!

Early in the divorce process, her spouse offered Augusta a generous settlement. Convinced she would uncover more assets, Augusta declined. Later, she discovered they had almost nothing, and noted,

I was real compulsive during that time. I had to know more. Because he offered me a huge settlement, that now I wish I'd took. But I thought, "No, I really need to know what you did with my life. Where have you been in our marriage?" I needed to know what happened. What went on? Cause this was my life I invested in it, but there were so many holes and questions.

Augusta described how she explained her decision to divorce to her daughters. "I took the girls to this swanky hotel room. I just wanted a different place to tell them, rather than home." Her older daughter became distraught and left immediately, and staying, "a week or two," at a girlfriend's home. Augusta explained,

I was trying to speak slowly and choose my words very carefully. I told them we were getting a divorce, and the older one said to me, "What did you do?"

Screaming at the top of her lungs. Then she turned it on herself, "What did I do?" And the younger one is just kind of sitting there.

Augusta revealed that her older daughter had difficulty coming to terms with the divorce, stating, "She was angry for years. She didn't want to go see her father when she came home from college . . . For her graduation, he wasn't going to go, and I said, 'Yes, you're gonna go.'"

Augusta also pointed out that her younger daughter, "worked her own way through it." She added,

[Younger daughter] saw the reality, she was able to put into words what she felt, what she saw. [Elder daughter], who's the outgoing one, couldn't talk about it. She couldn't pinpoint exactly. She didn't know what to say. She was very lost.

And it's only in the last few years that she's really come to terms with it. And she has a relationship with her father.

Augusta recalled the relationships that sustained her during the divorce process. She described feeling "abandoned" during the divorce process. She noted her family was, Supportive, a little bit of I told you so. Nobody liked him. They're all in different states. I didn't have anyone around. I told them [siblings], "Please don't say anything bad about [spouse]." You know, I couldn't handle that. I have six siblings, and we've always been close. They kind of took off too. Not completely, but they wouldn't let me go into it.

Furthermore, she explained,

I relied on three very good friends. They're the ones who are still my best friends today. My social life got very small. It was just the three girls who really stood by me. They came over and went through my pills to make sure I was taking my vitamin pills, you know, my anti-depressant, and this and that.

Augusta recalled that people often "do not know what to say" when couples divorce. She added, "They kind of leave. And I resented that cause I needed people. I needed someone, um, just to sound off." Augusta also believed that some people "want to see the drama" of a divorce. She recounted a friend "hounding her" for information about the divorce in front of both their daughters. She stated,

And she plugged away and plugged away until I was telling her the latest, and ended up in tears and screaming. And she just wanted the drama. And that taught me something. Some people want the drama and some people don't want to hear

it at all. They stop you and cut you off. They can't be happy for you. It was really a game.

Augusta recalled having difficulties with her health during the divorce process, stating, "During the divorce it was, I don't even have the words to put, to say how, how awful it was. And how much I hurt. Literally, my heart just felt tight." She visited multiple doctors and stated,

[I was] sure I had cancer and was dying. I mean I had numb patches. My hair was falling out. Even my hearing was dimming. My eyes were dimming. I had cramps, pain, the weirdest, oddest things. And I went to my doctor and he said, "You have stress." And I nearly punched him. I thought, are you kidding? So, I went to a different doctor. He said, "You have stress." This isn't stress! So, they sent me to um, they tested my nerves. And the doctor there said, "It's probably stress." I thought wow, you gotta be kidding! I learned how devastating stress can be.

About coping with the physical symptoms of stress, Augusta stated, I couldn't. I was incapable of sitting and breathing and going into nature. I tried all of that. Cause I know what to do. And I couldn't. I was on anti-depressants to begin with. He kicked it up a little bit, um, but I wish I'd had somebody to sit and breathe with me.

Augusta described relationships that changed or ended during the divorce process. She recalled a disagreement with a good friend early in the divorce process. Augusta stated, "She [friend] wanted a reaction. I was really angry and told her so. I didn't talk to

her for a long time. And later she apologized and we came back. We're quite close again."

Augusta noted she remained close to her in-laws after her divorce. "The mother-in-law, we've always loved each other and she was as supportive as could be. They understand that Mark is difficult." Augusta acknowledged the difficulty of shifting relationships; "People I counted on just, they just weren't there. They disappeared. I didn't confront them. I didn't get in arguments or anything."

Augusta stated that her relationship now with her former husband is, "Very, very cool. Fine." She added, "Now that I understand him. That he had issues. You know, I let all that go. I still love him."

Augusta also described the process of providing for herself after the divorce. She reported having been a nurse early in her marriage. Augusta stated, "I didn't want to go back to that. I wanted something happier . . . It was very hard, it took me about two years to change." She reported that her "greatest desire" had always been to be a therapist. She realized, however, that she was "invested in outcomes," and felt "I wouldn't like it if I didn't see immediate results." She added, "I have a short fuse when it comes to expectations, I will tell you once what to do . . . I would not be a good therapist, I have no patience at all."

Augusta's former spouse invested in a brain balancing service for which she worked. After two years, the business was not profitable and he closed the business. The [name] Club did not generate enough money to sustain Augusta. She has also worked in real estate, but Augusta described her most recent professional endeavor, running a divorce recovery group, as the most rewarding. She emphasized,

In divorce recovery, it's 10 weeks. We're following a book. I add to it. And they sit and feel it so quickly, that the feedback, it's instantaneous, almost. Someone told me the other day, "You're not a therapist, you're like Dr. Phil!"

Augusta described the early period after divorce as a time filled with many new friends and social activities. She began dating almost immediately after her divorce. She stated,

I went a little crazy and dated everybody. I had two boyfriends simultaneously, and that lasted about two years. It was great. The sex was amazing! [Former spouse] was very conservative in the bedroom and I'm not. So I was able to express this divine sexuality. I also realized that I can speak up and ask for what I want. There was one guy, and he would do anything. I would ask him anything at all.

In a similar vein, Augusta noted the dating and socializing she enjoyed was good for her. She explained,

I was missing fun! It was all the stuff I was missing in my marriage. It [dating] really helped me define what I needed and what is healthy for me . . . I gave up dating a few years ago, but that's okay. I'm really enjoying being by myself . . . and that's the biggest relationship I've developed, is with myself. Cause I'd been terrified of being alone . . . I lead a very happy life.

Despite feeling happy to be alone, Augusta noted the financial burden of being divorced, explaining, "It's harder. I have to say that. The money is gone." When discussing whether she would marry again, Augusta stated, "Marriage, I don't know.

Living together . . . I think the best of both worlds would be to get a duplex and to cut a hole through the bedroom!”

Augusta described an important “insight” that came forth after divorce; her emotional outbursts were burdensome for others. Augusta stated, “I realized I burned a lot of people out. And I was over the top hysterical. Now that I coach these people, I realize how bad my reaction was. It was terrible, personally.” In a similar vein, Augusta revealed she gained further “insight” when two girlfriends asked her to “take responsibility for my part in the divorce.” Augusta reported,

They were encouraging me to own some part of this . . . I thought, “What the hell did I do?” . . . They told me, “If you don’t forgive yourself you can’t forgive him.” I thought, “Well there’s nothing for me to forgive, I was the perfect mother and wife.” But you know, years later I realized I wasn’t at all.

Augusta noted she has become more selective about forming relationships after her divorce, affirming, “I learned to say no. Cause I was a big volunteer person. And I’m still working on that. Just saying no. Yeah, cause people will use me and rip me off.”

When discussing the unexpected aspects of her divorce, Augusta mentioned spirituality, money, and the differences between men and women. Augusta revealed that for many years she followed the Inipi spiritual path, including monthly visits to the sweat lodge. Suddenly, during the process of her divorce she ceased her visits, stating “I just stopped. I thought, ‘This doesn’t mean anything anymore . . . This doesn’t fit me anymore.’ So, I’m in the process, and have been for the last couple of years. Like, what’s next? I don’t know that yet.”

About money, Augusta found, “I’m surprised I’m not better with my money. And I’ve gotten myself in debt because of it . . . I’ve had to count every dime.” Augusta noted differences between men and women, and stated, “I’m surprised that older men haven’t changed at all since they were 17. I’m very surprised at the growth of women. We’re healers.”

Augusta asserted an influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment was founding the Club. She stated,

I would have recovery talks about every couple of meetings, the club was full of divorced people. And this guy who is a therapist would lead the group. So that really helped me. I believe everybody should be in therapy during and after divorce. Everyone, whether you think you need it or not. And stay there for like a year or two. It will change everything about your life, and the divorce. But that’s good. When you divorce you break down. Everything shatters. Now you can pick up the pieces you want, and create something new. But you really need help to do that. It’s too easy to fall back into old routines.

Augusta emphasized the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce. She stated,

I have a belief in myself that I can do anything at all, and that there is something out there for me. And I think I am doing it with this divorce recovery. I think that is why I am here.

**Judith.**

At the time of her interview, Judith was in her mid-fifties and identified as Mexican-American. Judith, who was married for 32 years, emphasized that the idea to



divorce was mutual, but that her spouse filed the divorce papers. She has been divorced for two years. At the time of her divorce, Judith's four children, three daughters, and a son, were 29, 27, 25, and 24, respectively.

When asked about her successful adjustment to divorce, Judith emphasized she had to learn to "be independent and to do things for myself." She declared, "You learn about yourself . . . we're stronger than what we think. The more time goes by . . . you learn just basically to be by yourself." She expanded on the idea of independence by stating,

I pretty much isolated from everybody around me, because I did not want to hear no one's opinion . . . I wanted to find out about my own independence for myself. Not somebody else telling me how it was gonna be, or what to expect.

Judith spoke briefly about events that led to her divorce. She stated she and her husband had known each other since they were 14. "My marriage was mostly old school . . . there was no divorce thought ever in my mind . . . but those little things just accumulate and I said, you know what? I can't do it anymore and everything falls apart."

Judith explained that she worked as a teacher for the first 10 years of her marriage. When she became pregnant with their third child, she left the workforce. The agreement with her husband was that she would be responsible for raising the girls, and he would take responsibility for their son. Judith said never questioned the arrangement until much later, stating,

I think that was the number one mistake. The moment we did that, we separated our family. He was going one way to basketball games and I was going to all this girly stuff. We grew apart without even realizing it.

Judith explained that she began running during the mid-1990s, and quickly became proficient. In 1998, she ran her first marathon. She invited her husband to the marathon, but he declined. Judith recalled her husband never took an interest in her training or running achievements, stating,

I think of the 60 plus marathons I've completed, he maybe went to three. So he didn't go support me. He's never been with me to Boston or Chicago . . . I don't know if it was jealousy, selfishness? I mean, I don't know how I can describe that.

As she advanced in her running career, entering several marathon races per year, Judith began to rely on the support of other runners. "Who were my main people? My other runners . . . After a while I enjoyed going by myself. Cause that gave me an escape. And I got used to being by myself."

Judith reported her husband's business was successful and that she had all the worldly goods she could possibly want. Despite material comfort, she emphasized,

I wanted the emotional. By that I mean, you get up in the morning and at least, tell each other something nice. I'd like for him to have asked me, "How was your run today? Did you feel good?" Something positive for what I was doing . . . By the time something special came up, like our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I said, "Let's do something special, let's renew our vows." [He said], "I'm sorry, I can't. I have to go to a basketball tournament."

At some point, she cannot remember when exactly, Judith realized she was unhappy in her marriage. She recalled,

It was an accumulation of things through the years, not something that happened from one day to the next. The way I explain it is like a candle lit up, and little by

little, the candle goes down, and then, there's nothing. The candle burns out.

Judith told her husband of her dissatisfaction. I told him, "I feel myself drifting away."

When they finally decided to divorce, Judith explained she left the family home and her former spouse purchased a small townhouse for her. She verified that her divorce affected the relationships with her mother, children, and friends. About her mother, Judith stated,

My mom, at the beginning, she was a little bit . . . well, my mom's a Christian pastor, so their ministry was mainly to restore broken families . . . So she had her point of view, and wanted me to restore my marriage. She said a lot of people are affected [by your divorce] . . . But she didn't really know what was going on until she found out my side. Then she understood better. She really supported me. She didn't judge.

When asked how her children reacted to the news of their parent's divorce, Judith stated:

Not good . . . with kids there's always gonna be the illusion of the mommy and the daddy. My son said, whatever makes you happy. The girls were more protective. They didn't like anybody around me. For them, nobody else was good enough.

Eventually, Judith was able to tell the children about the emotional distance in her marriage, and they accepted the divorce. Judith said, "They realized that as long as I was happy, that's what mattered to them."

Judith acknowledged that she lost and gained friends during the divorce. “You lose friends, but you gain friends. I think you lose the superficial ones . . . The ones that gave you the space for you to grow, but they were still there for you . . . we’ll always be friends.” Judith also acknowledged her close friend, Dana, who gave her emotional support during the divorce process, saying, “She pretty much knows the crazy journey I’ve been through . . . And she is my number one support.”

As she talked about relationships that developed after divorce, Judith stated, “I’ve made new friends, but I think I’ve become more guarded. Extremely guarded now. I’m very selective. I keep a lot to myself. It’s very, very rare that I’m gonna open up.”

When asked if this was different from how she was before, Judith stated, “I think I was always like that, but I feel it now extremely more. Because sometimes you open up, and you opened up to the wrong person and I don’t want to be hurt.”

Judith revealed that her feelings of guardedness had to do with a recently ended romantic relationship. “I can feel myself different, that’s for sure. Especially with the incident with [boyfriend], these last nine months.”

When asked to say more about the romantic relationship, Judith said, “When he came into my life we had a lot in common.” She said they had known each other for some time, but “I just never really paid attention.” As they began spending time together, he became supportive of her athletic endeavors. Judith recalled,

He had his biking, and when he would go out and bike, I’d go on my runs, or else I’d started biking myself. While he’d do his training, I’d bike too. He would come back and for to see if I was fine. He was extremely supporting. Very supporting with everything I did. After the bombing at the marathon in Boston, I went

through a period when I was afraid to be out on my own. So he would follow in the car, put my water out. There was a lot of support. I think he came on very strong and he did things that I was not used to.

Judith described her thoughts about [boyfriend's] attention, and said, I don't know if me telling him how I felt about the lack of support in my marriage, maybe he thought, this is how I can get her. But still, there was a very strong connection . . . It was not about what he had or how he looked, it was more what he was internally. That got me more emotionally involved with him. He did everything. I can't ask for more than what he did for me. He was what I needed the most at the time.

Judith recalled that her boyfriend became more possessive in the relationship, while also staying out of communication for several days at a time. She recalled, "I would tell him, at some point I'm gonna get to the point where I won't call back. When I'm done, I'm done." When asked if she was "done," Judith stated,

Yeah. And it hurt both ways. It hurt being done with him and it hurt being there with him . . . I learned to let it go. It was another experience to learn from . . . I cannot say I regret it. I believe everything happens for reasons.

Judith spent some time talking about her recent break up. She said, "My expectations of what I wanted were not really met . . . Maybe in my head I'm looking for this ideal thing and that ideal thing is not out there. I don't know. I've just learned to enjoy the moment."

Despite the recent break-up, Judith asserted she enjoyed being alone, stating, “I love being by myself. I love my solitude. Most of all, my freedom. That’s what I love . . . freedom to come and go.”

Judith affirmed that her financial situation has not changed since she divorced, by saying “[Former spouse] was always [been] supportive of me financially. He never really let go of the financial support.”

Judith recalled her mother and a good friend being spiritually supportive during her divorce, and stated,

I think my mom would have a big role in that . . . Another person who helped me a lot spiritually I’d have to say is [friend]. He explained to me that nothing in life is yours forever. Learn not to get attached to what you have, because nothing is forever . . . Enjoy the moment . . . Think only of the now.

Judith explained she found purpose after her divorce. She explained that many years of running and her experience of surviving the bombing at the Boston Marathon in 2013, inspired her to coach other runners:

I’ve been running for so many years – 20 years now . . . I’ve had the best journey during those years . . . I’ve made great, great friendships and still have them. By nature, I love to help – that’s my passion . . . After the bombing at the Boston Marathon, for some reason I was afraid to be outdoors . . . any little movement or noise would freak me out. I wanted to start a little group to help me and have someone to run with. It started with just three or four people.

Judith revealed that her running group now has up to 40 runners each morning at 5 o’clock, stating,

Right now, my main goal is to motivate others . . . And that's why sometimes I back off . . . it's about helping that person to go through that finish line with no issues. I've backed off of my own races. Right now, it has helped me a lot to help others.

Judith maintained that finding purpose and running have kept her healthy, and stated, "Physically I'm doing fine. Emotionally, I feel great. I think I can finally say I feel at peace . . . I don't have to pretend. I am me now, completely."

Judith noted she experienced a sense of grief after the divorce was final. She stated,

You have your days when you ask yourself, "Where did it go wrong, why? Can I start over again? If I'd done it this way, would this have happened?" All those years you went through were experiences . . . It makes you stronger . . . And I never want to go back there."

About her relationship with her former spouse, Judith stated,

It's good. We've gotten to the point where it's very amicable . . . we can do things together as a family . . . at least for the sake of the kids and grandkids . . . Give a good role model to them. So I think it's fine.

Judith asserted she is not immediately interested in dating or pursuing another romantic relationship, but did not cast romance out of the realm of possibility, and said,

Cause I've only really been involved with one guy. What can I say? I gave my heart to him. And I don't think right now would be something I would open up to. Maybe later on, but right now, that's pretty much a closed door. I have my friends, but that's as far as it gets.

Asked about the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce, Judith said,

I think my running. It has always been there. It's something you just put on your shoes and just go out. I'd cry, I'd pray, I'd laugh . . . It's my healing time. Also, meditation has helped me . . . It's something I never thought I'd do And I think that has helped me a lot. Being by myself and doing things for myself. Isolate. Even if I do it for 24-48 hours, that is healing for me. Not to have to answer anything or anybody.

**Lily.**

At the time of her interview, Lily was in her late 50s and identified as Caucasian. Lily was married for 34 years and explained that after she asked for changes in her marriage that did not materialize, her spouse initiated the divorce. She has been divorced for two years. Lily's three sons were 30, 27, and 23 at the time of divorce.

Lily began the description of her successful adjustment to divorce by stating the purpose of her divorce, "I had to choose to live, not just survive. I didn't ask for the divorce, I asked for changes in the marriage . . . improvements. And there was going to be no changes." She became emotional and tearful several times during the interview, and stated, "It feels good to tell you."

Lily spoke about the emotional pain she experienced for a long time prior to the divorce. She clarified that as she contemplated her spouse's impending retirement, she was not thinking about divorce, only that she wanted to improve their relationship. She explained,



We didn't interact together. I served him. There was nothing in it for me. And I was looking at his retirement . . . I was a housewife, and I didn't like the picture . . . so I told him, we gotta make some changes so we can interact together. So, I don't just do your dishes and take care of you . . . the only thing we have is lunch on Sunday. That's the only thing we share, ever.

Although she did not want a divorce, Lily said she told her spouse, I think we need to separate. You're going to have to fight for me, to want me. You're gonna see during separation that you're gonna miss this . . . there's nothing in it for me. And he said, "I do want a divorce." And I was very calm about it. I said, "Then ok. Let's go."

Although she was not the initiator of her divorce, Lily recalled having a positive reaction when she learned her spouse wanted a divorce. She said knowing her spouse wanted to divorce was,

incredibly relieving. I remember taking a deep breath. I remember he was looking at me. He was uncomfortable with the situation. I had to control my emotions, when I really wanted to scream and yell and dance, just be very happy. I felt free. I felt liberated. I did not have to ask him for the divorce.

Lily described her sons' reactions to the news of the divorce. She stated, "I'm still a little bit surprised at how much pain they were going through." When asked if her sons ever discussed the divorce with her, Lily said,

I'm not sure if they were being delicate with me, but they did say that they understood that it had to be . . . But life for them and things they were banking on changed so dramatically. They do blame me for that.

Lily revealed more about how dramatically her sons' lives changed after her divorce, and said,

They could always land at my house . . . I lived on top of a hill, and it was a very big house. And they all lived there, even though they had houses. They'd just land here . . . If I knew they were coming, or even if I didn't, there was always food in the fridge. I was always making a meal. And babysitting, just drop the kids off. And all that changed, because I had nowhere to live. And it was very hard on them.

Similarly, Lily said,

I guess there was a little bit of anger inside of me . . . I've been doing this all my life! A little sympathy here . . . just be parents and then get through this and re-evaluate how we're going to do this . . . My ability to be a giver changed and that really upset them.

Lily spoke about how many relationships changed during the divorce process. Her two best girl friends could not understand her decision, and at first, were not supportive. Lily also noted the difficulty she had admitting out loud that she was divorcing. Lily stated,

My two best friends took it bad. I told one friend probably the day after he'd [spouse] said he wanted a divorce. I called her . . . I never call her in the middle of the day . . . she was in her car on the phone . . . I said, "[Spouse] and I are getting a divorce." And I heard the car go eerrk! And she said, "Gimme a minute." . . . she pulled over and said, "What the fuck? Stop this! Don't even talk to me like this!" She was very upset . . . She thought my marriage was idealistic [*sic*]. . . I

had to point out things to her. It took a while. I did a great job of hiding the mess my marriage was.

Lily said she told the other girlfriend in person.

I told her my husband was very abusive, but she said, “You don’t know what you’re doing.” She kept trying to convince me I was making the biggest mistake of my life . . . It took almost a year to get any support from her. In fact, I didn’t even want to talk to her for a long time.

When asked about other friends’ reactions to the news of her divorce, Lily said, “I didn’t tell anybody. It was something I went through by myself. I was very embarrassed, very humiliated. I really did go from a very prominent position to a very humble one.”

When Lily was “finally able to speak about my divorce,” it was to her acupuncturist, who was compassionate and helpful. Lily explained,

I would go every 4-5 weeks, and there was a connection. One day, she said, “You know, you’re not doing so good.” “That’s very odd,” I told her. “I’m getting a divorce.” She said, “I have a name for you, he’s a divorce planner.” And I realized that telling people isn’t about telling how bad I am, it’s about getting help. So I got this divorce planner and he was also a financial advisor and he took over my life and saved it.

Lily explained she went to a divorce support group. “I did go to Divorce Care, and it was very helpful.” Lily stated that the people who did support her through the divorce process included her oldest and youngest sons, her boyfriend, and one of her girlfriends, who had come to understand Lily’s situation.

The other girlfriend . . . I love her, but she wasn't as supportive. She's loving, but I can't talk to her about my divorce . . . But my best friend and my older son. My younger son, too, was there when I needed him.

Lily emphasized that her lawyer and financial advisor were financially supportive. "They told me what to do . . . He [financial advisor] gave me a budget. And regardless of my budget, I definitely spend as little as I can." Lily recalled strangers were supportive during the divorce process, stating, "I went to my first party ever by myself. I was scared to go alone. It's so weird, but people were nice."

Lily recalled how, before she and her spouse had discussed divorce, that she had reached out to old friends on Facebook, including a former lover. She revealed,

I was calling out a year, a year and a half before my divorce. I'm not stupid. I was realizing that my life was changing. I needed to go back to my past . . . I wanted to see if there was still something there . . . And one of them was a former boyfriend.

A year after her initial Facebook post, the former boyfriend answered, and they resumed their relationship. Lily acknowledged he was financially supportive during the divorce process. "My boyfriend was paying everything. Anytime I wanted to go meet him in [city] or wherever, I never paid a dime . . . But he would give me a little extra whenever I saw him." Also, a girlfriend helped her. "The girlfriend who didn't support my decision gave me \$200 gift certificates to Whole Foods."

Lily revealed that an important part of her divorce adjustment was a visit she made to a hypnotist, stating,

“I was trying to get clear. I know you have to embrace the sadness, experience it . . . but I was looking for ways to find hope. I think that’s the one thing I missed the most. I still have faith, but I’d always lacked hope.”

Lily became emotional as she gave definitions of faith and hope. “Faith is knowing that no matter where you are going you’ll be okay . . . Hope is when you have something particular in mind that you want and you want it and you’re going to ask for it.”

Despite feeling as though she lacks hope, Lily stated,

I have an enormous amount of happiness. I just have to play with my faith. I go to bed every night and give it to the universe because tomorrow is what happens tomorrow. The only thing I know is that the sun is gonna shine.

Lily explained that the visit with the hypnotist helped her identify a theme of loneliness in her life and to understand that relationships are difficult. She affirmed,

Because I had experienced loneliness . . . Relationships are painful. Being in a relationship with anyone means having to forgive them, over and over again. And I was talking about this . . . life is full of people, and I’m on the right path, and my life is about to start . . . I left the session and I felt very empowered.

Lily described how verbally abusive her spouse had been during their marriage. Similarly, she would hardly allow him to be alone with the children because he put them down and called them names. She explained,

He would behave if I physically stood there. He was born in Egypt . . . he’s authoritarian, heavy-handed. He doesn’t get away with anything with me. I don’t

take crap. So he became more covert and devious. And he did things behind my back.

Lily's spouse "hacked my email account and found out I was having the relationship with my former boyfriend." He used the information against her and told their sons about the affair. As a result, she said,

I had to take his first offer, cause he had my emails. I confessed to the fact that, yeah we were not yet divorced when I started a sexual relationship . . . He told my kids . . . I told my lawyer, and she said, that's illegal, but you are going to have to hire a lawyer and sue him. So, I just had to let that one go.

Lily described the year between the time the divorce was filed and finalized was "difficult." She said,

The first thing my husband did the day after, was take all my resources away. He closed all my cards and bank accounts. I couldn't buy groceries or gas. That was illegal. He did it in such a way that I couldn't get an emergency hearing for 10 days.

Lily believed the divorce process would be fair, and that she would receive half of all she and her husband had accumulated in the 34 years of their marriage. She "had never worked outside the home; had never made financial decisions." Lily asserted,

He always controlled all the money . . . I paid all the bills, but it's his money.

Let's make that clear . . . I'd ask him to buy a dress, or a pair of shoes. If I bought shoes without him he got very upset . . . He never bought me a car, it was always in my kid's name. I was relieved I didn't have to ask for the divorce, because I did not know how to do that.

Despite her lack of formal experience in the workplace or financial knowledge, Lily stated,

I was willing to start a life . . . It was just going to be an adjustment . . . Because now I didn't have to account myself to anybody . . . and then the process began, and it's long, it's arduous, it's painful.

Lily discovered that her spouse lied about their finances during the divorce process. She maintained,

I got screwed. I got \$500,000 and he's walking away with almost \$3 million. He was using debts that we had paid off . . . He took everything out of the safe. All the proof of that . . . He got his family to agree that I still owed them money for the house they lent us money for 15 years ago.

Lily explained she felt she compelled to take her husband's offer because he had discovered her infidelity.

When asked how she adjusted successfully to her divorce, Lily stated, I'm a very spiritual person . . . My entire life is like I've jumped out of an airplane without a parachute . . . Everyone likes to know where they're landing, how they'll get there. I've never been given that security, ever. My Dad died when I was nine. My mom turned into a single parent . . . We went from living in a nice, beautiful house. We changed countries. I lived in a small apartment and shared a room with my two sisters . . . Life is always changing for me, but one of the things I learned is that it still works. You still go on, you know, and you make the most of it and you keep walking until you can't walk anymore.

In a similar vein, Lily revealed the emotional aspects of her adjustment to divorce, stating,

I was manic through the whole thing. I cried more than I've ever cried. I think I cried for the first time in our 34 years . . . it was a good, therapeutic thing to cry . . . My highs were very high and my lows were low, but I always had hope. And the minute I knew that I was getting a divorce I felt my life was gonna start, for the first time in a very, very long time. So I would say that my success was a week after.

Lily revealed that the most unexpected aspect of her divorce was, "My poverty. Um, that was big. But I don't have despair. I make \$12,000 a year. I've been to London twice this year. I went to Iceland. To Montreal. My trips are paid for by my friends."

About feelings of loss after her divorce, Lily stated,

I was afraid to be alone, but I always reminded myself that I'd never been more alone than when he was in the room with me ... I knew that we were never going to be together again, and in my heart we were never together.

Additionally, Lily explained that her physical and emotional health now is good, stating, "Never been better! Physically more fit than I was at 30. I'm eating good because I'm not having to feed him."

Lily named the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce as the following,

Faith. 100%. It has not let me down. I accept things as they are. I don't know how it works, but it always works. So I have faith. And the people who love me, really do love me. And that's how I do it.



**Avery.**

At the time of her interview, Avery was 91 and identified a Caucasian. Avery initiated her divorce after 23 years of her marriage and has been divorced for 45 years. At the time the divorce Avery had a son and a daughter who were 21 and 19 years of age, respectively, and had already left the family home.

Avery worked during her entire marriage, and thus maintained her routine did not change much after divorce. When asked to explain her successful adjustment to divorce, Avery had this to say:

By the time I got divorced, my husband and I were never really, really close. I guess I made a mistake. He was not very honest with me before we married.

Shortly after [the wedding], one of his sisters told me a whole lot of things that I didn't need to know, and it made me feel mistrustful, which I never got over. But I kind of thought, 'Well, there are some good things about this,' especially once the children were born. The kids sort of made my life.

In the same vein, Avery continued,

One of the things my husband was very dishonest about was his financial situation. He even was in debt when we married, rather than the other way around. So we were always poor. We always were trying to meet all the bills every month.

As a result of their debt, Avery had no choice but to work outside the home. She initially worked as a teacher, and then became a college professor. Avery stated she "grew to love" her profession, and added, "It sustained me over the course of my marriage."

Avery shared that her father had died when she was five years old, and stated, “It was very traumatic for me not to have a father.” She described how her spouse had been a disappointment to her as a father. She stated,

He was very stern to the point of being mean to our son, and favorited our daughter. Not too overtly, but subtly, that I’m sure. He was often not home. He was good at everything he did, except me, so by the time 23 years had gone by I was so completely through with him it was like my life went on the same way it had.

About her work, Avery explained, “I essentially supported my children. My husband used his earnings for his own pleasure and what he wanted to do. I picked up the leftovers [bills], which was almost everything.”

Avery discussed her professional life with much pride and satisfaction. She stated, I always loved my job, and I always did more than my job. I did the things I liked, that were constructive to my job. I really loved my kindergarten, and then I went from there to a community college in the 1960s, which was an almost entirely Black college in Newark, New Jersey, and it was a hot place to be! I didn’t mind the tension of being careful around Black people. I learned a lot of things about how to address them, and words not to use and to use.

When asked about how she went about initiating her divorce, Avery stated, “Eventually I just realized my marriage was worthless.” Upon realizing her marriage was over, she made the following proposal to her husband,

I think we should get a divorce. I would like to stay here until I can do it, because the house is big enough that we can. We wouldn’t be in each other’s faces. Or I

can stay at my Aunt's house. And he said, "Go stay at your aunt's house." So I said, "Okay."

Avery described how she simply, "packed everything up, and put it in my car on a Saturday morning." Staying at her Aunt's house proved to be difficult for Avery. She revealed,

My aunt had her brother-in-law living with her [his wife had recently died], and he got flirtatious with me, which made me very unhappy . . . one day I was very ugly to him, and he became my archenemy. So that was a mistake for me to have been there. It was a really hard time for me.

Reflecting on her marriage, Avery stated,

We never developed an honest husband/wife relationship the entire time we were married. As I look back, it wasn't that we were mean to each other, we just weren't "to" each other. I remember not wanting him to know things that I was doing with the children, which, in retrospect was kind of closing him out of family life.

Following the divorce, Avery came to some startling realizations about her former spouse. She shared how she never knew her former spouse was "so fragile." She added, "He was strong looking and did everything in a commanding way." Avery revealed that his seeming strength and actual fragility came to a head after he committed suicide approximately four months after their divorce was final. Avery shared, "We were divorced in March, formally. And three or four months later, he killed himself. So, I was both divorced and widowed simultaneously."

The interviewer asked if Avery found it unusual to be a woman married for over 20 years and then divorced in an era when divorce was not widely accepted. Avery stated,

Mmm, yes. In New Jersey it was sort of readily accepted. I didn't feel guilty about divorce. I didn't want to do it because of my children, but in particular, I didn't really want to be a divorced woman, but I never really was. For three months, I was. In my head, I think of myself as much of a widow as anything. The divorce was just a continuum of the relationship we'd always had. We were divorced after being married three weeks, you know . . . Our relationship never really jelled.

The interviewer asked Avery just how she came to understand, so early in her marriage, that she did not have a relationship with her husband. She replied, "It was all so obvious in everything. He had a secret life, sort of. And I had a secret life, sort of. My secret life was working all the time. His was missing all the time." The interviewer asked if Avery and her husband shared things together. "No, we didn't. He practically never talked."

Avery noted that she did not discuss her divorce with anyone. At work colleagues knew she was divorcing because they all worked in a small office together. The maiden Aunt with whom she went to live was not communicative or supportive, as the uncle had turned her against Avery. About work relationships, Avery stated,

I guess they [co-workers] knew because our office was small and everybody had a cubicle, so everybody knew each other's business. I remember when I came back from court and I was divorced, a couple guys, whose desks were near mine, were clapping for me. So, it was an okay thing.

About her Aunt, Avery stated, “I told you the incident with my uncle . . . He would influence her to be very mean to me.” The researcher asked Avery about her interactions with her Uncle. Avery responded, “He was just angry because I rejected him . . . But we never discussed it. He had a suspicion that there were other men in my life . . . which there were.”

When asked about other men in her life, Avery said,

It’s easier to leave your husband if other people like you. If other men like you.

So, I had sort of like two boyfriends, neither of which I ever had any intention, or never considered marrying. I was never on that trail.

The interviewer asked Avery whether the subsequent relationships with her boyfriends were fulfilling, and she stated, “Yeah, we talked to each other. There was more give and take and more self-revealing.”

About the two boyfriends, Avery was asked if she considered them romantic relationships. Oh, somewhat, yes,” she said. Avery also noted, “I wanted to remarry, but there wasn’t anybody in my life that I wanted to marry.” The interviewer asked Avery how she decided whether to pursue other romantic relationships. She answered, “I never decided. It was always people I know I had a real relationship with. It was never any big deal.” When asked to expand on the right person never coming along to marry, Avery responded, “Yeah, but when you work 100 hours a week and keep a house all by yourself, you don’t have time to go on.”

Avery also noted that her children had no reaction at all to the news of their parents’ divorce. She stated, “Nothing. They were home at Christmas, and I told them

both at that time. And we separated in January.” When asked again about other relational support she received, Avery said this about her co-workers,

You don’t really tell your co-workers your personal business. But we also supported each other all the time, through everything. We were almost all white and our students were all Black, and we needed to be able to communicate and be comfortable and keep the mix of culture comfortable for everybody.

Avery claimed she did not really have any friends outside of work besides a cousin and his wife. She recalled,

I had one cousin who lived in my neighborhood. Our children grew up together. And she was really very helpful. She was the only one. Her husband was my blood cousin, and his brother were supportive, sort of superficially. I knew I could call on them for help. Like, one of them took me to buy car.

When asked about the timeframe from deciding to divorce until the final decree, Avery stated, “It took about a year, because it was during the process of no-fault divorce being enacted in New Jersey.”

When asked about the unexpected aspects of divorce, Avery stated that there were none:

I thought I’d be relieved. I was. I thought I’d be happier without him. I was. I was worried my children would be troubled. If they were, they didn’t tell me or show me too much. They knew it wasn’t a good marriage cause they lived it. So, nothing really surprised me.

Additionally, Avery recalled how she struggled with the logistics of the divorce,

I had one time when I spoke to my attorney and didn't want to throw him out of the house. That was the only real grief time I experienced during the process. But after I divorced it was just a great big relief. And, I really never saw him again.

When asked how healthy she considers herself, physically and emotionally, Avery stated, "Physically, very healthy. I love exercise classes here and the pool . . . I fell a couple of years ago. That was the first time I ever had any problems."

Avery recalled the most influential factor contributing to the successful adjustment to life after divorce. She said,

That I was busy, and I've always loved my job . . . I really like the work and work never seemed like work; it just seemed like what it was my pleasure to do. And I never had any trouble in my job. So that's what really got me through divorce and through my life.

### **June.**

At the time of her interview, June was in her mid-fifties and identified as Caucasian. June reported she had been married and divorced twice to the same man. The first marriage lasted approximately five years; they divorced and remarried within one year, and stayed married for 21 years. June initiated both divorces and has been divorced for three and a half years. At the time of the divorce, June's son, 20, was in college out of state; and her daughter, 16, elected to live with her and move to [city] to complete high school.

Early in the interview, June called to mind the effect the divorce had on her children, especially her son. She stated,

My son did not do well with the divorce . . . It was his sophomore year he didn't talk to me. There was about a year when he decided he didn't need a mother, he was on his own . . . he even cut me off of Facebook . . . It took about three years to repair that relationship . . . we are back to being good, but not back to where it was. It may be 90% of where it was.

About her daughter, June recalled,

We were living in [name of city] and she auditioned for the [Name] High School Theater Fine Arts program and she got in. It was kind of motivating thing for her to get to do something she wanted to do . . . She and I never missed a beat, God bless her . . . Never had a moment where she rebelled or was angry with me or her Dad, so . . . Maybe she just saw more and knew what was going on, cause she was in the home. Her brother was already away.

June recalled the most difficult feature of the divorce process was the rupture in the relationship with her son, which has since been mostly repaired. "It was obviously the most painful aspect of the whole divorce was that . . . rupture of relationship with my son was the worst."

The interviewer asked June about the process of repairing the relationship with her son. She stated,

I wouldn't let him blow me off. Part of me knew it was developmental . . . but when it's happening to you it's not fun. So, um, I would just reach out, periodically, even if just once a month, so I knew he knew I was thinking about him. Wanted to make sure he was okay. I would either call or text, or send an email. So, I would kind of rotate my variety of communication . . . I would ask



my Mom. She could still see him, and she would tell me he's fine, cause she was still seeing him. Um, but the hurt of it was pretty bad."

June recalled that she recruited a girlfriend to accompany her to visit her son at college, and stated,

I needed to see my boy and put my eyes on him, and she was really helpful to navigate, not a peace treaty, but we had a meal with him on one day and a meal on the second day, and that was really it for a whole weekend . . . it was the first step toward things getting a little bit better, even though we didn't talk about the relationship, just . . . he knew I cared. He's never really needed a mother, he's always been independent, and that was why she was there, to remind me that his personality has been independent since he was little. She helped with the perspective and to take away some of the hurt.

Asked whether June and her son ever talked about the rupture in their relationship, June said,

Yeah, we did . . . So, at the end of that one year period, that was Thanksgiving the next year, and he did come home and were going to my parents for Thanksgiving, and fortunately, my daughter wasn't in the car with us and we literally pulled off the side of the road and had a "come to Jesus" talk, and we were both crying. So it was, it was pretty intense. That was the beginning of the upswing coming back, but it was still very slow building blocks. But right now, he's not a kid that wants to talk about "it."

The interviewer asked June if she had ever directly asked her son the things that bothered him about the divorce. She explained,

Well, I know what the one thing was . . . His Dad was in the Army and he was mandated to leave me the beneficiary on his life insurance. They have some protection in the military if you've been married for over 20 years, it's called the Former Spouses Act . . . That was one thing, his Dad didn't think I deserved the life insurance . . . It was my right by Federal law, and I didn't want to give that one up . . . And my son found out and asked me, "Mom, why can't you give that one up? It's no big deal." It was one thing I wasn't going to give in on. It didn't cost his Dad a thing. It was an emotional tug-of-war.

The interviewer asked June about the "emotional tug-of-war," and the process that helped her and her son move through that obstacle in their relationship. June replied,

I wish I could say there was some grand scheme, but when you're emotional and in the moment, you're not even thinking clearly. Cause it can make me emotional right now. I just knew that . . . I had faith that he would come around. I guess I knew it wasn't permanent, so I kind of just kept . . . circling. I guess when we both broke down, and he was telling about stuff that had happened to him Freshman year that I didn't know about . . . it was just a lot of stuff. I just feel like I wasn't able to be a mother for a period of time, and that was like an identity loss for me.

June continued that their relationship is almost healed, stating,

But we've come, like I said, about 90% back, just in the last weeks . . . I can just see, it's almost back, and I don't know if it's a loss that I'll ever get over. I am going to counseling for this exact issue! I don't know if I'll always feel that little

loss part, but my process, I don't think there's a word for it. I just, I wasn't going to give up, you know?

The interviewer asked June how her divorce came about. She stated,

“It was a very long and painful, tortuous decision. My husband has an anger management problem . . . he never touched me, but he would put his fist through walls. He had no ability for communication. As much as I went to school to get a master's in counseling and took him to counseling, he just could not . . . It just was not fun being in his presence. We divorced before, when the children very little, like four and one.”

In the same vein, June continued,

So the first divorce came about because he was like a child and I had two babies and he wouldn't help. I said, “You have to be a parent!” So his was very selfish behavior, maybe a little narcissistic . . . Inability to control his impulses. But after a year of being a single parent, I did not want my children to be raised by another woman. Because I knew he would get remarried at one point, cause that kind of guy usually wants to have someone take care of him. I could not count on the unknown and what was going to happen to my kids. So I kind swallowed my pride and we did work on things. Tried to do some counseling, and he calmed down for a while so we reconciled.

The interviewer asked June how her second attempt at marriage to the same man proceeded, and she recalled,

We didn't have any fists through walls, it was just this ongoing emotional neglect and abandonment, within my marriage. He didn't care. He might have said the

words, but there was absolutely no showing of it. I'm like, "you have to show me – I like some signs of affection, or do something. Do something with me." . . . I almost would take anything. And he just wanted to sit in his room and read, or he'd be on the computer. It just was abandonment . . . I've never been so lonely in my life.

The interviewer asked June for how many years she noticed the abandonment.

She said,

The last three or four years, that I could put a name to it . . . He worked away from home, which was a blessing, because it probably would have been a lot sooner . . . I just wanted somebody to talk to me. Is that too much to ask?

June reflected on the time period three or four years before initiating divorce. She noted that the experience of menopause affected her mental state, stating,

I started getting angry, and then I started going through menopause. I told him, I gotta go to an ob/gyn, and find out what's going on with my hormones, cause at that point I was just getting mad. I could feel a little bit out of control because of the hormones, and I think that may have been the final straw . . . I remember during that phase there was so lack of concern for me, or empathy that there could be something going on with me hormonally. And he basically said, 'Go get it fixed.' I was like, ewww! That just does not feel good . . . I looked in the mirror one day and said, "I'm becoming one of those angry old ladies." And that was the future I saw. After I separated, and the hormones did come back regulated, I felt great! I don't know if it was the burden lifting because of the hormones, or him. I felt so good!

June noted she initiated the divorce and said,

It was all me. He would have stayed in it forever. He had a roof over his head, the semblance of looking like you're successful. We had a beautiful home. It was a custom home. I got to design and pick out everything in that house. So it was harder to leave that house than it was to leave him.

June described what happened after she announced her intention to divorce. She stated,

“We were very thoughtful about it. I think it was the end of March and my daughter had til early June to finish her sophomore year in high school. So we made the decision, announced it, and I decided to stay in the home to find a place in [city]. We started telling people.

June had difficulty remembering exactly how they told the children about the impending divorce, but she was able to describe their reactions at the time. She related, “We had a foreign exchange student that semester and he was the sweetest young man. He was in the house when Tom and I made our decision. And when we told Rachel, he was the Godsend.” June recalled that the foreign student was

Like a big brother and was able to just talk to her, to be with her, I mean. She didn't cry. I don't remember her crying. I don't remember exactly what we did. We told her at home, and maybe she knew it was coming. I guess we called Jim [her son]. We must have called him, cause he was away at college. I don't remember.

June explained that friends and family were not surprised at the announcement of her divorce. She stated,

My parents weren't surprised, my best friends weren't surprised. The greater community was shocked, because we were in [name of city], and because I was a therapist in a very small town, nobody knew my personal business . . . As a result, I didn't have a lot of close friends. When I moved to [name of city], they just dissipated.

The interviewer inquired about June's relationship with her former spouse as they journeyed through the divorce process, as well as whether it changed after the divorce was final. She stated that the divorce process began amicably, became contentious, and is currently, as she pronounced, "polite." Expanding on their relationship, she noted,

It really was very amicable in the beginning, but because of some of the sticky points, which I mentioned earlier, and I don't know if there was something else that he didn't agree with . . . we really had a 90% agreement on everything . . . He turned into an ass, with no filter . . . Only if no one was around . . . if anybody else was around, Mr. Calm, Mr. Nice Guy. So, I just learned not to talk to him if we were by ourselves . . . There were terrible text messages, just obnoxious . . . And it's taken him up until this year to be polite to me . . . Civility is all I need.

June began describing the process of successfully adjusting to her divorce. She recalled,

I threw myself into my work, and realized I had to make more money than I was making as part of a divorced couple. The stressful part was that I made a very analytical decision to open a group practice. To have other people work for me so that eventually I could take some time off and not have to be the only way that

money comes in. I could take a day off and still be making money. That has been very successful. My ability to take care of myself financially.

Asked to say more about her career contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce, June said,

I was just like, let me distract myself. So, this is what I built [gesturing to the office]. I created [name of business] and I worked real hard to do that. I have an office in [name of city] and currently in the middle of opening one in [name of city] next year. So that is how I'm fixing it. I'm just keeping super-busy. I'm like a workaholic now! I've never worked this hard! And it's wearing me out. I'm 54 years old and I'm exhausted all the time because I'm putting all this energy into work. And I know there needs to be a balance, but if it helps me get through all of this . . . Hopefully, it'll be good on the other side.

June described how she maintained and established new relationships after her divorce. She said,

Well my congregation. I'm Jewish. I went to the same one, we would drive in from [name of city]. My kids went to Sunday school there, so I'd maintained my membership with the temple. I do have some continuity with those friends. I guess I tried to pick from that . . . There is a ladies' group I go to every month or so and some of those women I've known for a while. I've tried to be active in our temple and it's only been this last year that I've had the time and brain space to do some volunteering there.

In the same vein, June spoke about her in-laws and new relationships, including romantic relationships. She said,

I continued my relationship with his parents and that was important to me. When they called every Sunday night I was the one who talked to them, not him . . . I've continued that. I went to his Mother's house for Thanksgiving this year . . . I tried to reconnect with some of my girlfriends, cause I felt like it was time to get back in touch with them . . . Then toward the end of my separation, even before the divorce was final, I did start dating. I tried the online dating, and that was so draining, like an exhausting dilemma. But I did meet one or two nice guys.

June reflected on her decision to pursue romantic relationships, and stated, I'd always wanted to be in a good relationship. I think we're kind of supposed to be partnered up, somehow. I just felt it was important to me, to not live this life by myself. So I went very definitively . . . the very first guy I went out with, I told him, you're it, you're the first guy I've gone out with in 27 years. And he was a kind man, thank God . . . I knew that was good for me to be taking baby steps.

June mentioned the one romantic relationship she has had since her divorce, stating, "What happened last year was that I met a guy that I knew in junior high, who I hadn't seen or talked to in 35 years. He came into my life out of the blue." June expanded on the romantic relationship and her experience, stating,

He swept me off my feet. It was very romantic, very charismatic, and a sweet man. A loving heart. The emotional connection . . . Just real expansive, seemed a very healthy way to talk. Respect. Time. He liked to spend time with me; he even lived with me for a few months. And that's when I found out he's an alcoholic. So it was a bittersweet experience. Cause I had to break it off with him . . . It was not pretty, because he was the Jekyll and Hyde. He was the really great person sober,



and then he was a mean drunk . . . I feel kind of like my heart was broken so that's why I think I'm a little resistant to dating just yet.

June reflected on the relationship and the insight she gained, and stated, I'm kind of worn out with that now, but it was a nice relationship for me to know, number one, that I can love again . . . I can be in a healthy relationship . . . if it would just present itself! It is surprising to me how hard it is. I misjudged how hard it was going to be.

When asked about remarrying, June said,

I don't even think that's necessary for me right now. I just want to have somebody to hang out with. Somebody I can trust. That's a big deal for me . . . So, um, I'm not against it. I'm not looking for it either.

June explained she wanted to join a divorce support group during the divorce process, but had trouble finding the right group. She said,

I tried to find a divorce recover group, cause I thought I could use that, but I never really found one here . . . I found a Meet-Up group that was lay led, and I went three or four times. They were nice people. They just weren't quite right for me. It was mainly bitching about things, instead of processing . . . So, I didn't go back, but it may have been helpful for that time frame.

June indicated she planned financially for her divorce, as she was the spouse who maintained the household finances. She said,

I think in the years preceding my divorce, I made sure I had some money in my own fund, in my own name. Separate property. It was my money I was earning. I

started squirreling away, it wasn't even a whole lot, but it made me feel like I have a little bit of cushion that is mine.

June described how her life changed as she faced becoming divorced. She said, As I faced divorce, I think I had a whole lot of hope, that there is a better life out there for me. One where I'm not just feeling depressed and kind of downtrodden. That's just not me! I had a lot of hope that there was life on the other side. It wasn't clear what it would look like, but I just knew it had to be better.

June was asked if her ideas about hope have manifested. She replied, "I'm not there yet, no." The interviewer asked what was still lacking. June responded,

I would like to be with a partner. Now I have had a taste of what I think a good relationship should be like and I know the quality of what it looked and felt like. That piece of it I would like to see again, except in a healthy person.

Similarly, June described her loneliness as an unexpected aspect of her divorce.

She said,

I don't really like being alone. That's been a new thing for me to be totally alone. It was like the divorce and then both my kids are away at college. So it's like the empty nest multiplied, um, and I think what's hard is nobody really notices . . . They just assume you are okay. So that's been my newest dilemma is now I'm the empty-nester . . . and being alone. But, I've got my whole life ahead of me. It can be depressing to me sometimes. That's why I'm so busy, filling my time is to avoid really thinking about it. Just kind of waiting it out, you know? Maybe I'll meet somebody randomly or somebody knows somebody, you know . . . It's a whole lot of ambiguity and I'm not sure I understood that as I was thinking about

divorce. It seemed to be a better risk than staying in the marriage . . . And that part is true. It is better. Yeah, cause I don't go home to an angry person. I go home to my puppy dog.

And finally about loneliness, June said,

I didn't know the feeling of being lonely would affect me. I just felt like I'd already experienced it. But even though you can feel alone in a marriage, there is still someone there, virtually. So that little piece of security is gone . . . I do worry, what if I fall down and hit my head? Nobody's gonna know. Being alone is different than being lonely. So that's probably the biggest surprise.

The interviewer asked if June experienced any grief or sense of loss after the divorce, to which she replied,

I was mourning it [the marriage] before it even ended. I don't have a loss over the marriage. I have no regrets over that . . . There is not a shred of anything in my mind saying, "Oh, I wish I'd done that. I wish we'd tried one more thing." None of that, no regrets.

June described her physical and emotional health after divorce; mainly that her business interferes with taking care of herself physically, and that mentally, going to counseling has been helpful. Physically, Jane said,

It's gone downhill. I overeat now. I almost never work out, and I have bad excuses for it; I have to do administrative work at night, payroll, etc. . . . I haven't found my niche yet . . . I moved, so everything is now new. I've never lived in [name of city], I don't know the area, I don't have my 'go to' places. I guess a lot of things were ruptured due to physical location.

About her psychological health, June said, “I’m mainly good. I’m functioning just fine . . . I have a counselor, so that’s a good support system.”

June said the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce was

Having supportive parents. They’d seen their daughter unhappy. That was probably the biggest factor that helped me . . . I’d call my Mom just about every day . . . Just to know they’re there for me, you know, was very . . . was therapeutic . . . She’d say, “I don’t know what to say to you, but I can listen.”

“That’s it, Mom. Thank you!”

Finally, the interviewer asked June if there was anything else she would like to say about her successful adjustment and also asked *how* she knew she was successfully adjusted. June replied,

Well, I’m not crying every day. I’m taking care of myself . . . To me, unsuccessful would be kind of wallowing in it. Not getting out socially at all. Or staying bitter. I got mad one time at my [former spouse] during a therapy session . . . I think I had a little grief over what I had wished the marriage was . . . I had to finally admit, for him, it was all he could do. I was the one beating my head against a brick wall. And you can’t change other people. I think I had to realize I really couldn’t change him . . . I thought I could! If I was nice enough, or say something the right way, we wouldn’t get mad. I thought I had more impact and this is naiveté, you know.

**Anabelle.**

At the time of her interview Anabelle was in her late 50s and identified as Caucasian. She was married for 20 years, was the initiator of her divorce, and has been divorced for five years. Anabelle was working in Europe when she met her spouse, a Belgian. When they married, she facilitated the immigration of his four children and him. Anabelle and [former spouse] later had two children of their own. At the time of the divorce, the older children, two sons and two daughters were 36, 35, 33, and 32, respectively. Anabelle and [spouse's] children, a son and a daughter, were 16 and 14, respectively.

Anabelle recounted the circumstances that led to her divorce. She said, My husband got laid off from IBM, and went from making \$150,000 a year to making zero, in one day. And couldn't find a job. And he actually never found a job, but three years he was home and frustrated about it . . . He ended up with some depression about it. And wouldn't go see anyone, and was angry with everyone . . . So, he was making everybody angry and edgy. And the kids, too. Me, of course, of course! I kept asking him to go see a counselor. Even a marriage counselor, and he wouldn't do it. And so it became a drinking problem and then there was an anger management problem on top of the drinking problem. And there was really nothing else I could do. I felt like I had to protect my children.

About the divorce, Anabelle clarified,

I never wanted a divorce, and I still don't. We went through such a great time of him moving to this country and his four children. We moved to [name of city].

We were doing fine, we were both working. And I thought, this is just a phase. I

really did think it was a phase we could overcome. I really honestly believe in my heart he's still my soul mate . . . Although I know he's not coming back, because he's got it pretty good . . . he still doesn't work, he or his girlfriend.

Anabelle recalled the stress and worry she was experiencing during the time her husband was unemployed, and stated,

It was hard to go to work. I'd go to work thinking, "Okay, I get away from that for a while." And these things were too much during the day and too much in the evening. I didn't want to go on vacations with the family. I didn't want to get in the same car with my –ex . . . It was always something negative . . . He couldn't see well enough to get out of it. He thought it was everybody else.

As she struggled to manage her spouse's anger and depression, Anabelle sought advice from a best friend. The two families had children the same age as her youngest two children. The families had gone camping and shared holidays together. When the researcher asked how the divorce came about, she recounted the following,

Funny you asked! . . . I was telling my friend, I'm having a little trouble with this [her marriage]. And she said, "Well, you want me to talk to Jacob about it?" And I said, "Yes. I'll take any help . . . If you think you can talk to him, that's great." . . . It turns out that they started seeing each other.

In the meantime, Anabelle asked her spouse to move out of the house. She stated, I asked him, "Please, can you just spend a couple of months with a friend, because we need to talk to each other, but we can't talk to each other right now. There's just a stressful house, so please, just move out. Let's get some calmness in our lives and then we can talk."

Her husband refused to move out, so Anabelle's counselor advised her to write an email spelling out Anabelle's wishes. Anabelle recounted some of the contents of her letter,

"I'm really sad to write this, but I'm very afraid of your anger management problems, but I'm afraid to tell you in person, so I'm writing you telling you that I go to a counselor and she's been very helpful to me, and in the best interests of the children and me, and yourself, I would like you to go to a counselor to try and figure out what we can do better . . . I feel so strongly about it, that if you can't go to counseling within the next 30 days, I'm going to file for divorce." . . . So, I had to file for divorce to get him to move out into an apartment.

Anabelle emphasized she never believed she and her spouse would actually divorce. "He had no job. He had no family in this country, other than his children, and were connected together for that . . . I never, never, never thought that he would want a divorce."

Anabelle recalled how incredulous she was when she discovered the betrayal of her best friend. She stated,

I can't believe one of my best friends did that to me . . . it was really two betrayals at the same time . . . I never really believed in divorce . . . Cause I think if you really love somebody, you should always be willing to come back to that at some point . . . I didn't have a chance once she got involved. The kids knew before I did.

Anabelle recounted how she told her two youngest children about the divorce. She stated,

I brought the children in my bedroom. Dad was still in the house, and I said, “You know Dad’s going through this phase and I hoped it wouldn’t last a long time, but I has lasted a long time.” And they were like, “Yep!” . . . “What I have done is ask him to go to counseling in the next 30 days, and if he can’t do that, then I’m gonna file for divorce. And they said, “Don’t do that! I thought you were never gonna file for divorce!” I’m like, “You know, we don’t have to divorce, we just need little time away and he needs to go to counseling.” And they said, “But if you divorce, he’ll run away!” . . . “No, why would he? . . . Daddy’s got to get his head on straight and he’ll come back.” And they said, “Okay,” and that was it. And I was wrong.

In the same vein, Anabelle recalled the children’s reaction when they found out there really would be a divorce. Anabelle said the children were, “Devastated. They are still devastated about it . . . the older kids, uh, he told them. I thought it wasn’t my place to tell them . . . he said that I threw him out.”

Anabelle explained her relationship with her former spouse’s children. She stated, “The girls don’t talk to me . . . The boys I talk to all the time. They are all in Texas.”

Anabelle revealed the difficulties between she and her husband as they journeyed through the divorce process. Anabelle stated, “[It was] horrible. Worse than horrible . . . the former friend was living her divorce and anger about her husband . . . through my husband . . . So, he lost his voice. Whatever she said, he did it.”

Furthermore, Anabelle stated,



I really believe that if you get married you gotta figure out a way to work it out. And I know things change, and people grow apart, and this and that. There's a possibility . . . that we could grow apart, but we didn't.

When the researcher asked Anabelle to describe her successful adjustment to divorce, she stated, "Let's see . . . I ended up with the house, the kids and the dogs . . . The only huge change for me was, I have to pay somebody to do the lawn [laughs]. So ..."

Anabelle was asked *how* she successfully adjusted to divorce, and she explained, A couple of things contributed to successful adjustment. One is I'd been seeing a counselor . . . so I had a little bit of head start. I had somebody to talk to, and I think it's important to have somebody consistently to talk to because your mind gets in kind of a scramble mode, when you know you have to take all the responsibilities yourself . . . I kept going to my counselor, I had a few friends that were friends before that were kind enough to say, unconditionally, we're your friends, and come do stuff with us, and so I kind of kept the same friends.

Anabelle disclosed that between the time she and her husband separated, and the divorce was final, both of her parents died within a week of each other. She recalled, My parents were both ill . . . my mom was in an Alzheimer's home ... My Dad got ill and uh, I knew that he wasn't going to get better. I told him I was going to get a divorce, but I never talked to him about it and we didn't divorce while he was alive, thank goodness. Then my father passed way. We went to the funeral in [name of city] . . . But then my mother passed away, just six days later So we go

back and put her in the ground, right next to my Dad. The ground was still fresh there. Six days later.

Anabelle described this time as one of “terrible loss.” She received spiritual and emotional support from a circle of friends and from the synagogue congregation.

Anabelle reported on the spiritual and emotional support she received. She stated,

I had a core group of friends, maybe 10 couples, and my counselor, certainly not my parents, because they were ill and then they were gone. Certainly not his kids, because in the beginning they were afraid to talk to me because they thought it would make their Dad angry. And that was a horrible loss for me. That I was losing my husband, losing my parents, one of my best friends, and losing my four children I raised from pups, you know? It was a lot of loss at the same time. And then I lost my job!

Anabelle described the Jewish tradition of mourning the deceased. She stated, In the Jewish tradition, you should go every day for a year, for prayer service for the dead. *Shiva* is the first seven days, and then for a year you go every day and say the Mourner’s Prayer for the deceased relative. So, I was going like clockwork, every day, at 6:00 o’clock, to the synagogue. I saw the same comforting people there. We didn’t really talk about it, but it was a big, big, big savior for me. So, I went on Saturday morning, and sat by myself, and the kids really didn’t [want] to go. I, on purpose, didn’t go sit with any of my friends. Sat by myself, and called that my space, you know? Did that consistently for a year. And went every afternoon to that little 17-minute service.

Anabelle described how the mourning ritual helped her. She stated,

It was something predictable. Everything was predictable. Which was completely different than everything else in my life! So, it was not just the same people at the services, but the same tunes, the same prayers, at the same time. I just told myself, “If there is any time I need to look inside myself and find the strength, this is where I’m gonna do it.”

Anabelle revealed, “I spent a lot of time volunteering, because I lost my job.” She was then “offered some short-term paid work with the synagogue.” She explained that this experience helped support her adjustment to divorce and gave her confidence in her next paid job. She stated,

There’s always lunch after service on Saturday, so I made sure I went in there, was meeting new people, and friendly. I met a lot of old people, because they sit by themselves, and I’d introduce myself . . . The office director there said . . . Can you work full-time for a little bit? . . . We need to get from point A to point B, and I did that for a little bit, and it was nice to go in and have pleasant people there, and they appreciated my work and I could be creative and also be boring with the computer stuff.

Anabelle believed the relationships at the synagogue also contributed to her successful adjustment. She said,

Yes, I think, they didn’t talk about it and I didn’t talk about it. But it was supportive. They knew I was divorced because it’s a synagogue. The strength came from my reaffirming that the synagogue was some place where he wasn’t going to be, and there were friendly nice folks where I could talk about the divorce or not, and it was okay. I think it [adjustment] wasn’t just me and a group

of friends, it wasn't just me and my counselor . . . I tried really hard to extend further out and be places where I didn't have to think or talk about that and I think that's the strength that helped me be successful in other ways too. Because I didn't just wallow with the same people and try to live in that. I wanted to break out from that.

Anabelle further described her process of successful adjustment to divorce when she stated,

I knew for myself and for my kids that we needed to pull out of it, and we weren't going to pull out of by going back to the same places. We were going out to dinner at people's houses – it was comforting, but without Dad it was weird . . . For a while I had people over to our house, and the kids weren't that happy about helping out . . . [but] They were happy to kind of have some normality to being with the same people that we used to hang with. At the same time, we needed to break out and do other stuff.

The researcher asked Anabelle how she and her children *how* they broke out and did new things. She said,

I guess the new thing I did was, make new friends – extend out from our group of friends . . . we need to jump out to new friends, which included inviting them over for dinner. The new relationships were in line with my interests and with people that the kids were around.

Giving examples of doing new things, Anabelle explained,

[Daughter] was on volleyball team, so people from volleyball, and [son] was in the Boy Scouts . . . we got together with more Scout friends . . . We would go to

people's houses that were part of the synagogue that we didn't know well. People from my committees at synagogue would come over for meetings and they'd [the children] see that we were getting along and adults could be nice to each other.

Anabelle talked about her work life and recounted that the experience of being fired during the middle of her divorce shook her confidence and desire to find another job in the field of Information Technology. Anabelle explained,

I did have a time after I got fired from my job, that I had cold feet. I couldn't go back out because I was afraid. It was just too much emotionally . . . That's when I did some work for the synagogue, and then I started looking for work again. It just gave me a little encouragement, you know, these are nice people in the office, and I can do this. And then I went back to IT work.

Anabelle explained how she managed the financial aspects of becoming divorced.

She said,

The good and bad of my parents passing away, was that . . . I ended up with some money. So, for the first year when we were separated, I was not working . . . I took out probably \$100K to keep the family going . . . I told him, I'll buy my part of the house and I gave him all the cash and investments. And for about a year and a half, I lived on the money from my parents, and then after I got work again, I haven't touched it . . . So financially, it was a good and a bad thing.

The researcher asked Anabelle if she had more to say more about her life after divorce. She revealed,

I didn't really feel comfortable going to parties, it was just too awkward to go by myself . . . I just felt uncomfortable talking to people there. Didn't want to answer

people's questions . . . so I just didn't go to parties . . . I had to learn to fix a few things at the house . . . I spent a whole lot more time, quality time with my children, on purpose. I felt I needed that more than they needed that, but we both needed that . . . I felt like their mental health was more important. Really important. I tried to spend as much time as I can.

Anabelle also discussed the unexpected aspects of divorce. She said, I don't want to date anybody . . . I've had people ask me out on a date, and I'd say, "I don't want to date anymore." I'll say, "Let's go out to dinner, no pressure. I'll make sure I pay my half." I don't want any relationship . . . I don't know why. Just reject the idea every chance I can.

Anabelle continued, I feel like some of my friends, not everybody . . . have in their mind, here's a divorced woman and I don't want her spending too much time with my husband. I don't know why that comes to my mind . . . but I think they're uncomfortable. Cause I certainly don't want to.

According to Anabelle, another unexpected aspect of her life after divorce was the "wonderful" co-workers she encountered in her most recent job. She said, I had an awesome job . . . I had more fun at my job than I've ever had at a job . . . Even when it was stressful or frustrating. I thought, this is nothing compared to breaking up your family. I'm more happy with happy things, and things that would normally be, maybe be big deals just aren't! Maybe I'm just more chill about everything.

Anabelle revealed that even after “so much loss in my life,” there was a point at which she realized she was okay and felt happy again. She stated,

I think when I got my last job . . . with this company and it was great . . . it was very rewarding in so many ways. Then I felt like [audible sigh], okay, we’re back on track. You know, my kids were happy, I had a job, and they have their own lives . . . I took them on vacation . . . so I think we’re back in the saddle.

Despite feeling successfully adjusted to divorce, Anabelle explained she still feels “grief” about “what has happened.” She stated,

I feel that all the time, but not really all the time. I would say that it’s always in the back of my mind. I think that’s part of the reason I don’t want to date anyone. I don’t want to feel that grief again.

At this time, Anabelle looked emotional again, and the researcher asked if she was, in fact, feeling emotional about her statement. Anabelle replied, “Just emotional that we’re talking about all this stuff. But no, I don’t. Thank goodness the older kids are back. The respect for family is back.”

Anabelle spoke about the relationship with her stepchildren. She said she did not really speak to her husband’s daughters, but not because of the divorce. She stated, “They were not sure why their parents divorced the first time . . . no one really talked to them about it. So, their easiest target was me to blame. I let them have it; that’s fine.”

With her spouse’s sons, Anabelle said she had “deeper and closer” relationships, which were ruptured at divorce. Anabelle stated,

One of the boys wouldn't talk to me and I was very hurt by that. My grandchildren, I couldn't even see for a couple of years. And now, I go over there, and when they come to [name of city], they stay with me in my home.

The researcher asked how Anabelle was able to repair that relationship. She said, I have an aunt in [name of city, who's always been very supportive . . . The stepkids are in [city]. She told me, "Always come bearing gifts, you're the Grandma." So I kept trying to, without getting in their face, without trying to come over, I would send gifts to the kids . . . and holiday greeting cards . . . I was just always there, but not trying to be in their face. I think at some point, Brad [step son] actually said, "I'm so sorry, Anabelle, but I really felt for awhile that I had to choose between you and Dad and I didn't want to make Dad mad . . . I felt like if I made Dad mad, he would run away and I wouldn't have a Dad. But I knew that if I was not nice to you, you'd be there for me." So um, the other one, who's 32 now, said, "You were always there for me when I was little, I'm always here for you now."

Anabelle described the current relationship with her former spouse. She said the relationship is,

Good and bad . . . my former spouse was and still is very influenced by this woman he's with . . . So, he was a sweet guy, he hasn't been that nice to me . . . when he's away from her, he's very nice. And when she's not in the room and I have to talk to him, he's very nice. But when she is around, or there, he's not nice at all. So, I um, I try to separate, I try not to be around her or have anything to do with her.



Anabelle gave an emotional description of a recent encounter with her former spouse after learning one of the older sons attempted suicide. She stated,

[Former spouse] called me and said, I'm having a hard time with it. And so I said, "Why don't we get together now?" He said, "Really?" and I said "Yes, and you're coming alone, right?" He said, "I understand." So, we went with my son . . . and had coffee with Dad, this week. And I told [son], "This is what families do for each other. We're not just here for ourselves, we're here to support Dad [begins to cry]." So, we did. We talked and talked. It was very nice.

The researcher asked Anabelle about the emotion coming forth and what it meant. She said,

Yeah, I think it's just . . . I think I made a bad investment when I married [former spouse]. What I wanted out of it was a family [crying]. And uh, what I got . . . was a broken family. So, but as far as being successful, my kids are doing great, um, I feel good about my job search now. Dogs are still alive. You know, that part is good. I have new friends, more friends. I think that except for family the rest is great.

Anabelle described her physical and emotional health, and said that, except for a few extra pounds, she is in great physical shape and exercises often, especially when she is not working. Emotionally too, Anabelle asserted she was well. She said,

"I just went to the doctor . . . all my blood tests are good . . . I spent a lot of time exercising when I wasn't working . . . Emotionally, I'm good, except for when I talk about that particular stuff. Otherwise I'm fine. I'd rather be by myself. I'm totally fine, than to be with someone who's angry about everything.

As we concluded the interview, Anabelle reported the most influential factors contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce. She stated,

I've always wanted to be a good role model for my children. What better time to do it than now. I've always thought beyond me a little bit. But my kids need to see me taking care of me. Need to see me taking care of them and for me to demand that they take care of me. So, I think that onward through the fog, that's the most important thing to me. If I didn't have my kids, I might think otherwise, but that's the only reason.

In closing, Anabelle wanted to sum up her experience after divorcing. She said, Sounds kind of corny, but making the world a better place is so rewarding and I have time to do that now. I can choose when to do that. And I don't have to take care of anyone else. Because my kids are becoming self-sufficient, and my former spouse is being taken care of by someone else. So, I consider that the biggest success, really. If you ask me why I think I'm successful, it's because of that.

**Marguerite.**

At the time of her interview, Marguerite was in her mid-fifties and identified as Caucasian. Marguerite was married for 30 years and was the initiator of her divorce. She has been divorced for three years. Marguerite's three daughters were 23, 19, and 16 at the time of her divorce. The older two daughters were in college and had left the family home, and the youngest was home with Marguerite and her spouse.

The researcher began by asking Marguerite to describe her successful adjustment to divorce, and she began, "My successful adjustment is very successful, from the point of when I became separated until now is 100% successful in my eyes."

The researcher asked *how* she successfully adjusted, and Marguerite provided greater detail, and said,

Through intensive therapy, I started out three times a week . . . through a recovery program. I did enter rehab four years ago. At that time I went for 47 days for recovery from alcohol and addiction to pain killers . . . I followed to the letter, the recovery plan. The psychiatrist . . . recommended medication, which I took as prescribed . . . I went through therapy with him in which I dealt with a lot of issues. I was very diligent in attending AA meetings . . . I built a strong support group through the people I met there. I also began my spiritual journey . . . I built a strong relationship with my current family that I did not have . . . I broke the bonds with the dysfunctional relationships that I had.

Marguerite continued to account for her successful adjustment to divorce, and stated,

I went back to school and pursued a second career at the second part of my life. And now I'm in a relationship that's an equal relationship . . . we give 100% of ourselves to the relationship, but we also have balance in our lives.

Marguerite spoke briefly about the relationship with her former spouse. She said, My former spouse was basically . . . my higher power. He determined my life. He was very controlling . . . He determined how much cash I had, where I went, who I talked to . . . He knew where I was, who I was with. He tracked my phone, he tracked the mileage on my car.

Marguerite explained how her divorce came about, providing some background information. She revealed that she became addicted to "alcohol and painkillers" and went

to an addiction treatment facility. Afterwards, she realized the “dysfunction” of her marriage. Marguerite explained,

It was after I got sober . . . when I was in rehab. I realized how controlling he was. He started to call the rehab instructing the clinicians what they needed to do . . . what medications I needed . . . telling them when I needed to leave . . . When I got home, telling me that I was fine, I didn’t need the therapy . . . to follow through with AA. I didn’t need to do any of this . . . That he knew what I needed. That’s when I realized how much in control he was, that I allowed him to be in my life . . . I did have a choice, I didn’t have to be in this relationship . . . Through therapy I got the strength to move forward in my life. I realized my daughters were watching me. That I did have a choice . . . that I could move forward. I could go back to school and have a career, and be an independent woman.

Marguerite described her process for deciding to divorce. She said,

My process was long . . . probably at least a year, to get the courage to even mention it . . . he was very controlling . . . he couldn’t even hear the word divorce. Once I mentioned it to him, the credit cards were cut off, the checking account was cut off. So, I had to plan it out.

The researcher asked how Marguerite planned out her divorce, and she replied, I had to get my own checking account, get my own post office box. I had to plan it out in detail, and this was advised to me by my lawyer, by my psychiatrist. I didn’t just wake up one day and say, “I want a divorce.” Because I knew him and knew how controlling he was. I went about it in the proper way.

In the same vein, Marguerite described what happened after she told her husband of her intent to divorce. She stated,

He was very unhappy about it. He wanted me to stay in the house, until the divorce happened. He even wanted me to sleep in the same bed. He immediately started checking my emails. Wanted know why I changed my passwords, convinced I was having an affair. He started to stalk me. He became even more controlling . . . He refused to go to counseling. I asked him to go to couples and individual counseling. His mental state became very erratic, to where I had to move out. He refused to move out; he refused to accept the fact that we couldn't be married.

Marguerite reflected on her children and how they reacted to the divorce. She noted the older two of her three daughters were living outside the home in a nearby city. The youngest, Marguerite said, was home and knew about the turmoil going on between her parents. Marguerite described the reactions of her daughters when they found out their parents would divorce. She said,

They were extremely upset. Uh, they . . . how my husband handled it, and I asked him not to do this, is that immediately he ran to [name of city], and announced it abruptly without me being there . . . I was leaving the family, that I was having an affair . . . My younger daughter . . . I'd already discussed it with her, and what was going on.

Marguerite then moved out of the family home and was estranged from the two eldest daughters for about a year and a half. She said,

He told them I was having an affair, that I was a meth addict, that I was selling meth, and so a whole line of . . . And so my daughters stopped talking to me for about a year and a half. And I continued to not say anything to them about their Dad. And I continued with my therapy and went back to school, and um, they saw me get better and on my career path, . . . and realized that what he was doing was wrong and what he was saying was incorrect . . . they felt very betrayed. And now I have beautiful relationships with them.

About her younger daughter, Marguerite explained,

She saw the turmoil of the relationship, because she was in the house . . . she came to me and said, “Why are you still married to dad?” . . . She saw the dysfunctional relationship . . . When the decision was made, she was comfortable with it, and my other two daughters were not.

Marguerite emphasized how much she wanted to repair the relationships with her older daughters. She stated, “They were very angry and not willing to listen . . . after how they were approached in the beginning, by their father. Later on, after that, there was more open discussion.”

Marguerite expanded on the notion of repair and reconciliation during this time of estrangement,

It took about a year. And we had to each set our boundaries. And I allowed them to set their boundaries with me . . . allow them to ask questions and to understand, and come back when they were ready. Now, I have absolutely wonderful relationships.

Changing topics, Marguerite described her relationship with her spouse as they journeyed through the divorce process. She stated,

It was horrible . . . because we were business partners. I was very adept at negotiating business-wise. I was able to negotiate very well for myself . . . so on a business level we were able to negotiate. On a personal level, we were not.

Marguerite said her family was very supportive when they found out she was divorcing. She recalled,

They were surprised because there was always that professionally, everything's fine, everything's going great with the business . . . but they were supportive as to, "If there's anything that you need, we're here for you emotionally, or anything else you need, we're always here for you." I have two sisters-in-law, that would call me and talk to me, and offer emotional support.

Marguerite noted that her friendships were "not very much affected" by the divorce. She said, "There was some friendships that he had, just some guy friends. None of our couples friends. There were no alliances. We still have mutual friends."

Marguerite explained the relationships that had been emotionally, financially, or spiritually supportive during her divorce. She stated, "I have several friends that were emotionally and spiritually supportive . . . emotionally, my sisters-in-law . . . My therapist was huge . . . three days a week. He was awesome."

About financial support after her divorce, Marguerite said, "I did well financially before I got divorced. Fortunately, I knew business and did well in business, that I didn't have to worry about that. And I was very careful about that process before the divorce."

Marguerite remarked that she made new friendships after she divorced and that these were different from previous friendships. She stated,

I was in a business where people always wanted things from me because I was successful in business . . . they wanted things because of what I had, not for who I am. And now I have relationships just for relationships.

Marguerite went back to school after her divorce to pursue an undergraduate degree. She is currently employed as a coordinator at a residential substance abuse treatment center. About her change in profession, Marguerite said,

We built four sports bar restaurants from the ground up. I sold my half to him and then I went back to school for social work and I'm about two semesters away from graduating. So, I totally changed my careers. Best thing I ever did.

Marguerite described how her life changed as she became divorced. She explained, "It was just a sense of happiness. I didn't have to look over my shoulder anymore. I didn't feel like I had to report in. I had a sense of freedom."

Marguerite recalled some of the unexpected aspects of divorce. She said, "Absolute happiness." When asked to say more, Marguerite noted she had not expected to be "happy." She stated, "I expected to be more fearful of the unknown. Now I have faith . . . and it's more remarkable than I ever imagined."

Marguerite explained she "never looked back" after her divorce. She added, "I have a sense of joy . . . It was more like being released from prison at first and not really knowing what to do . . . because someone has controlled you for so long. Now it's like, what do I do? This is awesome! And a sense of freedom."



Marguerite described her current relationship with her former spouse. She said, “It’s a cordial relationship. I truly have no resentments or ill feelings for him. I’ve moved on. I have an awesome relationship with my boyfriend, and I hope the same for him.”

Marguerite wanted to report that her “faith and spirituality” were impacted by the divorce process. She stated, “I’ve always been spiritual, ever since I was a little kid . . . but I just had a leap of faith [to divorce], that I had to put my faith in going forward.”

Marguerite said she considers herself healthy, physically and mentally. She said, “I feel my feelings, I let my feelings out.” She noted this was “different from my previous life,” and said, “Yeah, very. When I was a kid I was taught, ‘Suck it up. Stop crying. There’s nothing to cry about.’ And I’ve just learned to feel the feelings . . . I’ve learned that my feelings are okay.”

Marguerite mentioned her current “boyfriend” and how she decided to pursue another romantic relationship. She said,

We met 25 years ago, and we were both in relationships . . . When I divorced, I saw him at a social function. I was never pursuing another relationship, we just happened to see each other . . . We got together for coffee, and we just started to date. Things clicked and we’ve been together ever since . . . We have a very loving and compassionate relationship . . . we each have balanced individual lives, and we come together with equal relationship.

Marguerite acknowledged she “struggled with alcoholism and drug abuse” throughout her marriage, but had never gone to residential treatment until just before she left her marriage. She stated,

I had done intensive outpatient [treatment] for a very brief time, and I had tried to quit on my own, but I was not successful. And through past experiences, I knew that if I stayed in that relationship I would have relapsed . . . Knowing from the 30 years in that marriage and trying to change someone else was not going to work.

Asked if there were anything else she wanted to say about her divorce or the divorce process, Marguerite said, “I wish I would have pursued it earlier, and had the courage to do it earlier.”

Marguerite divulged that she knew for a “long time” that she was unhappy in her marriage. She stated,

I was unhappy for a very long time. It may have been 15 years . . . I just dreaded the day I asked for the divorce. I knew the day I asked, it would be the day of reckoning. And it was . . . I finally realized I was strong enough to do this ... And it was through therapy and going through rehab, and through the recovery process . . . My life is hugely different. And yes, I am so much happier than I was before.

Marguerite described the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to life after divorce, and stated,

The morning that I woke and realized I am myself, my own person, and independent. I had been in a very dysfunctional relationship and I needed to leave that relationship or I was going to relapse, and if I relapsed, I was going to die.

**Ella.**

At the time of her interview Ella was in her late fifties and identified as Caucasian. Ella was married for 23 years and was the initiator of her divorce. After having been divorced for four years, Ella remarried approximately one year ago. At the

time of her divorce, Ella's son, 22, was in college and her daughter, 18, was a senior in high school.

Ella laughed as she described her successful adjustment to divorce saying, "It didn't happen by accident, I worked really hard." Ella continued by saying that she worked hard at being successful at her divorce and that the process "began before formally filing for divorce." She said,

I knew three years before the divorce that my marriage was in major trouble. I sought out counseling . . . I eventually got [spouse] to go as well . . . I knew I needed help. We [counselor and I] looked at it like getting from one side of the sea to the other side, the post divorce . . . As we got a year or so away from the divorce, [spouse] didn't know [about her plans to divorce]. I was begging him, "Please, let's work on this together," and he refused to.

Ella expanded on the notion of her troubled marriage. "[Spouse] didn't know." She said,

Well, he knew our marriage was in trouble. That's when I said, "Please to go marriage counseling with me." And halfway through he stopped. And that's when I realized I couldn't do this anymore . . . Marriage is not a solo flight, and being married to him was a solo flight 100% of the time . . . I knew that I had a plan . . . I needed to get [daughter] out of high school. And so, I just kind of faked it.

In the same vein, Ella revealed, "I started journaling . . . was probably my greatest strength. It gave me insight into who I really was and what I needed." Ella explained how journaling gave her "insight." She stated,

I would sit at my computer, and I would close my eyes and just let my fingers go crazy. It was almost like vomiting. I know that's a horrible image, but it was like I need to regurgitate what was going on in my soul . . . Sometimes I'd go back and read it and be like, wow, I didn't even know this was going on . . . I knew I wanted love in my life, because even though I was married, I didn't have love in my life.

About announcing her intent to divorce, Ella explained that she and her spouse, "Announced in December that we were getting a divorce, but we still lived in the same house . . . until July." Ella continued,

I knew that once I got to the other side, with the house sold and everything, that I didn't want to be as broken as I was . . . By the time I got to the point I knew it was over, I was broken. In every sense of the word. Physically, mentally, emotionally.

Ella reflected on the important lessons she learned from "listening to a series of audiotapes about love." She said,

I found a series, called Attract Your Soul Mate Now . . . So I signed up for that and did all the audios and workbooks, and that really opened up my eyes and my heart . . . I did this before the divorce. I knew we were going that way. The number one thing that came out of that was, first of all, you have to learn to love yourself. So that was the biggest part of my journey, was learning to love myself.

Ella described how she learned to love herself:

Ahhh! It's still a process. I haven't mastered it yet. But learning to take care of Ella, learning to take care of Ella's physical needs, learning to say no to others.

I'm that person who cannot say no . . . What else? Investing in myself. Investing in getting massages. It was little baby steps . . . Also, finding and reconnecting with friends . . . going out and looking for that big love of my life . . . that was a big part of my healing.

Ella reflected on the relationships that contributed to her successful adjustment to divorce. She stated,

This is going to sound a little odd, but I met a lot of men online. And a lot of those men I never met in person, became amazing friends. And it was really interesting through those friendships I learned a lot about myself . . . I was validated that I was a good persona and that I was worthy of love . . . the other thing was living with Uncle [name].

Ella explained that Uncle [name] was her 90-year-old great uncle whom she had promised to care for in his final years. After her divorce was final, Ella moved in with Uncle [name]. She said,

So here's this 90-year-old man, and the hardest thing for him to do is get in and out of the chair. And when I'd leave to go travel for work, he'd struggle to get out of that chair. And I'd say, "No, [name], I'm gonna bend down and give you a hug goodbye." But he wagged his finger at me and said, "You are worth getting up for." And for this man to do the most painful thing, to stand to hug me goodbye, cause I was worth it! That was the greatest healing moment of all.

Ella explained more about how she initiated her divorce and gave some history about her relationship with her spouse. She said,

[Spouse] was a non-participant in the marriage. Didn't participate in raising the children at all. He had an affair . . . with his television and the remote control and the recliner. And his world revolved around that . . . after counseling and his refusing to continue counseling, I just remember getting to that point of, "I can't do this anymore." [Spouse] and I never fought, face-to-face. Everything was passive aggressive behavior, on his part. We didn't communicate well, obviously. I forget the exact moment that I said I want a divorce.

About telling her children about the divorce, Ella stressed that she had always had a policy of rigorous honesty with her children. One night, her daughter asked, "Are you and Daddy getting a divorce?" Ella spoke about her response to her daughter saying, "I'm not going to lie, yeah, we are." So I told her . . . the kids were just devastated. They knew that things weren't right, but I'd faked it so well."

Ella acknowledged that others were surprised when she and [spouse] announced their intent to divorce. She stated,

I really think most of the world was shocked. Ella and [spouse] are getting a divorce? But they seem so happy! Yeah, he was happy. Nobody knew the silent rage that was going on underneath me and the brokenness that I'd gotten to.

The researcher asked Ella about the "silent rage." She replied that through counseling she came to "understanding that not dealing with anger was part of my brokenness. When you don't deal with silent rage . . . I mean I lost my health. I got so sick in 2008."

Ella described that the announcement of her intent to divorce affected her relationships with immediate and extended family members. She said,

It was awkward, because we realized that once [daughter] knew, we had to tell our son. The kids were devastated. We still had to live under the same roof, we still slept in the same bed! I mean I wouldn't let him touch me. Of course, he hadn't touched me for months prior to that anyway. It was just as awkward as hell . . . Then, [spouse] positioned himself to be the kid's best friend, and they rallied around their Dad. [Daughter] told me, "You are the most selfish bitch I have ever known, destroying our home and our family."

About her in-laws, Ella said,

His family was devastated. I think they were angry. Nobody understood why. [Spouse] was the funny guy, life of the party, everybody loves him, and people couldn't understand what was going on. My family was also somewhat in shock. The kids still aren't over it . . . divorce is never easy.

Ella revealed she regretted drawing out the divorce process. "I thought that waiting until [daughter] got out of high school would make it easier, and that's an illusion, it's never easy on children, no matter what their ages."

Ella had more to say about the impact of the divorce on her children. She said, [Daughter] had a hard time getting through the teenage years; [son] was easy. [Daughter] and I were butting heads. That also contributed to the demise of our marriage . . . I would draw a line in the sand, and say, you're not going to do this, or you're going to clean your room, or whatever. I would come home and Dad would, 100% of the time, overrule anything I'd said . . . she became more and more rebellious. She was Daddy's little princess angel and I was this bitch. So that relationship really struggled for a few years. But now . . . she's still Daddy's

little princess and gets everything she wants, but I will say, we have a good relationship. [Son] is a lot like his Dad. You don't deal with emotional issues, you don't discuss emotional issues, so to know what's really going on with him is hard. He and I have a better relationship than with [daughter] through all of it . . . He comes to see me more frequently than [daughter] does.

After they announced the divorce, Ella disclosed that the relationship was, "very cold, but we were cordial. We still communicated somewhat." As Ella and her spouse journeyed through the divorce process, she said they were civil to each other. She recalled their counselor said,

She said, [the counselor] "You guys . . . can choose to fight, or to not fight, cause if you do fight, the only people you are hurting are your children" . . . When it came to our children, we would both cut our arm off for the kids, so we agreed, we are not going to fight through this.

Ella described reactions from friends or co-workers after they found out about her divorce. She said,

My really, really close friends were not shocked at all. They saw the silent rage in me before I did . . . I work remotely so I didn't really have co-workers. I would say the people who knew me well were not surprised at all. Many were like, "Kudos Ella, for sticking it out as long as you did." But I had no negativity. No backlash.

Ella recalled her brother and Uncle [name] gave her emotional support during the divorce process. She stated, "My brother was my biggest supporter of my leaving [spouse]. Also, my Uncle [name]. I've never been close to my mother." About Uncle



[name], Ella said, “He loved me so much. The greatest gift he gave me was unconditional love. He just lit up when he saw me. What woman doesn’t need that in her life?”

Ella reported another source of emotional support from a male friend, whom she met online. Ella said, “I haven’t seen him in years, but we still talk and text each other. He was a huge support for me. Especially on the days when I was really down.”

Ella also disclosed that her relationship with her therapist was supportive during and after the divorce process. She said, “During the process was definitely Dr. [name of counselor]. She was like my captain and got me across the rough seas to the other side and I was home.” Ella noted that her journaling also was helpful for her during and after divorce. “Seeing in writing what my soul and gut was feeling . . . I journaled for about two to three years. I could not function until I could get out whatever was inside.”

Ella said she managed the financial aspects of her divorce by “learning to live below my means.” Similarly, she clarified “fiscal responsibility is important” because during her marriage, “We were on the brink of financial disaster more times than not. There was one time we saved the house from being sold on the courthouse steps by an hour.” Ella recalled her “surprise that I was not fearful of the future.” She added, “I think my biggest fear was my kids . . . but I never had any fear about myself, I’m a survivor . . . I was excited to discover the next chapter of my life. I had visualized this.”

Ella reflected on the unexpected sadness she felt about losing her in-laws. “One of the things that was hardest for me was the loss of the [name] family. I love [former spouse’s] mother more than I love my own mother.” Another unexpected loss for Ella came when she left the family home to take care of her Uncle [name], and the children went to live with their father. She stressed, “Motherhood was such an important part of

who I was, then all of a sudden, the kids move back in with Dad. So now here's this nucleus of a family and I'm not a part of it at all."

Ella touched on romantic relationships she had during and after divorce,

After we'd announced we were getting a divorce, I was still traveling for my job.

I had men friends, I did. It's not something I'm proud of and something I'd never

want my children to know, but it was part of my healing process. Part of my

journey and I have no regrets about that. It was what I needed to do to get to

where I am now.

In a similar vein, Ella discussed dating and her sex life after divorce. She met men online and described a very healthy appetite and enthusiasm for sex that she had not known existed. "I met my friend [name] on the dating site Plenty of Fish. I dated several people on match.com and then of course, [current spouse]." About sex post-divorce, Ella said,

Oh my god, fantastic! I had an experience that woke a sleeping dragon that I didn't even know was there . . . If anybody had told me that my body could do what I thought happened only in fantasy books, I'd have argued the point!

Ella continued to talk about finding love and partnership after divorce. Ella said, "I knew I wanted to pursue love. I was not willing to accept anything less in my life than big love." She proclaimed to be happily remarried now.

When she was asked about the most influential factor contributing to her successful adjustment to divorce, Ella said,

I was not willing to accept brokenness. I was determined to get on the other side and I was going to find joy in my life and happiness, no matter what that picture

looked like . . . The most important word to me is cherish. You can love your dog, and you can love the homeless person, but to find someone who cherishes you and honors you and respects you . . . those are the things. The most important thing about a marriage is partnership . . . Gotta have it. I found that and I found me!

### **Presentation of Data and Results of Analyses**

The purpose of this research was to obtain knowledge about the experiences and relational processes of midlife women who divorced after a long-term marriage. The researcher opened each interview with the general question, “Tell me about your successful adjustment to divorce.” Other prompting questions posed by the researcher included, “*How* did you successfully adjust to your divorce?” or “Say more about that.” Occasionally the researcher would ask for clarifications in the participant’s timeline, such as “Had you already filed for divorce at this time?” To generate data about relationships during divorce adjustment, the researcher asked, “What kind of relationships would you say supported you through this time?” or “How did the relationship with your children change, if at all, as you progressed through the divorce process?” The researcher also asked participants about the most influential factor contributing to their successful adjustment. When participants appeared to have finished telling about their successful adjustment, the researcher would ask, “Is there anything else you want to add?”

After sorting categories and comparing similarities within and between conceptual categories, three overarching themes accounted for the data. The themes were labeled Frame of Reference, Transformation, and Relational Competencies. Eleven subthemes emerged among the major themes and accounted for the research participants’

experiences and relationships as she adjusted to her divorce. Table 2 illustrates these themes and subthemes.

Table 2

*Themes and Subthemes Found in This Study.*

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**Themes and Subthemes**

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**Frame of Reference**

Aspirations  
 Contextual Perspective  
 Perception of Time  
 Ambiguity  
 Use of Metaphors

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**Transformation**

Early Phase  
 Emotional Journey  
 Later Phase  
     Work life  
     Personal agency  
     Finances

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**Relational Competency**

Lack of Mutuality  
 Relationship with Children  
 Relational Resilience  
 Relational Mutuality

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**Frame of Reference**

Frame of Reference refers to each participant's distinct perspective of her divorce experience, the manner in which the participant told her story and the stories of others, the words she chose to describe her experiences, and the description of her emotional reaction to divorce. Experiences of time, ambiguity, and use of metaphors as she recounted her story also contributed to each participant's perspective on her divorce. Participants also expressed their desires for something better in life. Subsumed under the Frame of Reference theme are the categories of Aspirations, Contextual Perspective, Perception of Time, Ambiguity, and Use of Metaphors.

**Aspirations.**

Many participants spoke about aspiring to something more, whether it was living fully, being free, or finding love at some point in their lives. Participants' histories and experiences framed their hopes and dreams for the future. When discussing aspirations, participants sometimes referenced this subtheme as a motivator for the divorce, others as a component of their successful adjustment to divorce, and still others referred to current aspirations for their lives.

Lily described her aspirations as wishing for a better life. She stated,

I could have stayed in the marriage . . . But I had to choose to live, not just survive. I was willing to start a life. I felt my life was gonna start. I was looking for ways to find hope.

In a similar vein, Mary Jo demonstrated her aspirations by stating that during the process of divorce she remained "focused on the freedom part." Referring to aspirations, at the time Augusta chose to divorce, she demonstrated aspirations by noting, "There is

something out there calling me to do something else.” Similarly, June stated about her future, “I need somebody to care about me . . . I gotta have something here.” Anabelle aspired to simply wanting a better marriage, but her spouse refused her request to go to counseling. Paradoxically, she stated her aspiration when she said, “I didn’t see an end to it [the conflict].” Hazel revealed she had long wanted to move to “[name of city] and open my private practice.” And finally, Marguerite demonstrated her aspirations during the interview when she stated, “I realized I had a choice. I didn’t have to be in this relationship . . . My daughters were watching me I could move forward, go back to school and have a career, and be an independent woman.”

#### **Contextual perspective.**

Contextual emphasis is a broad category describing the circumstances and conditions encompassing the participants’ divorces, including *how* each woman recounted her story. The category accounts for participants’ interpretations of the actions of their former spouses, children, family members, and friends. Contextual emphasis also encompasses descriptions of how participants switched from first person singular (“I”) to the second person (“you”), or first person to third person (“he”) when discussing or interpreting her experiences.

In particular, Mary Jo spent much of the interview describing her former spouse’s drug addiction, relapses, inappropriate behaviors, and *his* response to the divorce, which she filed and moved quickly to complete. She said, “He was pretty much focused on being free and doing what he wanted and dating and embracing his addiction . . . and whatever he wanted to do.” Accordingly, she described her former spouse’s “unpredictability” after the divorce:

He's so unstable. I'd get him to agree to things, but I was always worried about if he would back out, or what was going on, and at one point he was so hostile toward me, and so angry . . . I was really worried about what he would do, especially in an altered state . . . He does the synthetic drugs.

Expanding on the notion of her former spouse, Mary Jo continued, I always knew what the end would look like. Always. So, where I am now is exactly where I planned to be. I don't think he knew what the end looked like. And when it started dawning on him what the end looks like, I think he was furious.

Likewise, Lily spent a good portion of the interview detailing her spouse's behavior during the divorce process. In one example, she said the following,

He left the house in December and went to live with a girl at work. That people said he was having an affair with. He became . . . Her son needed a guardian, because she was going to [name of city] for work. So, he became the guardian. That was exactly a month after he asked for divorce. My husband has a lot of financial resources, but I would call him very psychologically unsound about money. He was always acting like he was poor . . . He has about \$3 million, but he's living at this woman's house and renting out the rooms to subsidize his rent to her. So weird, but it is what it is.

Similarly, Augusta described her spouse's personality this way, So, another thing is that he was very introverted. We balanced each other, obviously. And he wouldn't go out with me. We never had a party. We never had people in. When we were invited someplace, I'd go alone. He just never went. I

found out about five years ago, he has Asperger's, and he admits it. And I thought, "Oh! Had I only known!" I wouldn't have had so many expectations.

Hazel explained her interpretation of her children's adjustment to the divorce in these terms:

I think the relationship my daughter has with her Dad is probably the most volatile and probably the most damaged from all of this. My son seems to have, he's kind of suppressed a lot that's happened. He doesn't dwell on it, but she does. And that's probably been the most difficult with me as I've completely cut my ties with him [former spouse]. It's been hard to support them in their relationship with their father.

Judith discussed her interpretation of her friends' reactions to her divorce. She stated, "You lose friends, but you gain friends. I think you lose the superficial ones . . . The ones that gave you the space for you to grow, they were still there for you "

A notable aspect of contextual perspective was participants' tendencies to switch pronouns, sometimes in the middle of their statements. The researcher observed the pronoun switch from singular to plural among several participants. Hazel was remarkable in her use of the second person *you*. Although her tone throughout the interview was hopeful and optimistic, within the first five minutes of the interview, as she recounted the dissolution of professional relationships after the announcement of divorce, she switched from *I* to *you*, when she stated,

I think I was pretty angry at everyone for just backing off completely . . . When I've been in situations when other couples are having problems, or infidelity, or going through divorce, you often have a tendency . . . to just sort of step away.



Similarly, reflecting on her emotional journey, Hazel switched pronouns when she reflected on her decision to move to a different city. She said,

It wasn't hard leaving the house either. I think at the time it was sad, but there was also that level of excitement. So, you look at that relationship that you have with all your possessions, with your home, with that community you live in, and I look back and think, "I'm so glad I don't have that anymore, cause it's too much work." You move from a 5,000 square foot house to a 1,700 square foot house and you're like, "This is great! I don't have to deal with all this crap anymore."

Judith, also, within the first five minutes of the interview, switched from saying *I* to *you* while referencing her experiences. When she referred to relationships affected by her divorce she said,

You lose friends, but you gain friends. I think you lose the superficial ones. You lose the ones that you thought were your friends, but weren't. And the ones that gave you the space to grow are the real friends. There will be some that judge you for the decisions you make.

Lily switched pronouns during her interview when she discussed the difficulty she experienced in talking about her impending divorce. She revealed, "So, I did mention it . . . it was very hard to do . . . I'm getting a divorce. It's something you hold onto for a very, very long time." In a similar vein, Anabelle switched pronouns when she reflected on the importance of counseling while she was divorcing. She said, "It's important to have somebody to talk to . . . your mind gets kind of scrambled when you have to take all the responsibilities." June gave a stirring account of the rupture and repair of her relationship

with her young adult son when she said, “I wish I could say there was some grand scheme, but when you’re emotional and in the moment, you’re not thinking.”

Associated further with switching pronouns, Avery recalled that revealing her divorce to colleagues was not socially acceptable. She stated, “You don’t really tell your co-workers your personal business.”

### **Perception of time.**

Aspects of time emerged across all participants’ descriptions of the divorce process, including, the period of time since their divorces, time that elapsed from filing for and completing the legal divorce, and times during which participants reporting being unhappy in their marriages. Other temporal aspects of divorce adjustment were comprised of time participants spent planning for divorce, time spent repairing relationships, and time spent working at their jobs.

For one participant, the act of admitting aloud to someone else that she was divorcing took on a temporal quality. Lily described difficulty announcing her divorce to anyone outside of her closest circle of family and friends. “It took about two to three months. It was very hard to do.” She revealed the connection she had with her regular acupuncturist who noticed, during one of their regular sessions that something felt “off.” Lily admitted, “I told her – I’m getting a divorce.”

Participants noted their divorces were generally completed in a year or sooner, from the time the divorce was filed to signing the final decree. About her timeline for divorce, Hazel recalled “Six months. It went real fast. I pushed it.” Similarly, Mary Jo recalled, “I filed and then moved things along very, very quickly.”

The following excerpts from participants' interviews illustrate their notions about recognizing the temporal quality of the loss of the marital relationship. Judith emphasized that the loss of her marital relationship did not happen suddenly. She stated, "It was an accumulation of things . . . Not something that happened from one day to the next."

Several other participants described the temporal qualities of knowing their marital relationships had deteriorated and of planning for divorce. Augusta revealed she knew for some time that her marriage was in trouble, stating, "It was several years that we knew things were falling apart." Ella, also, recognized the lifespan of her marriage was ending, stating, "I knew three years before the divorce that my marriage was in major trouble." Marguerite revealed during her interview that the end of her marriage was drawn out for years. She stated, "I was unhappy for a very long time. I dreaded the day that I asked for the divorce." When asked to be more specific about how long she had remained unhappy in her 30-year marriage, Marguerite said, "It may have been 15 years." About time spent planning or preparing for divorce, Hazel disclosed, "I did a lot of strategic planning before I filed for divorce."

Pursuing romantic relationships took on a temporal quality when Avery described her devotion and dedication to her job. She said, "I've always loved my job . . . it just seemed like what was my pleasure to do . . . but when you work 100 hours a week . . . you don't have time [to pursue romance]." Anabelle recalled her spouse's uncontrollable anger drove her to ask for a brief separation to regain clarity and work on the marriage before finally filing for divorce. She said, "I asked him, 'Can you please just spend a couple of months with a friend? Because we need to talk to each other, but we can't talk to each other right now.'"

June explained during her interview the time it took to repair the rupture in the relationship with her son, who became angry and uncommunicative when he learned of his mother's refusal to concede on a crucial element of the divorce settlement. She said, "It took about three years to repair that relationship. We are back to being good, but not back to where it was, maybe 90%."

### **Ambiguity.**

A sense of ambiguity or lack thereof permeated participant's stories. For some, the lack of ambiguity was instrumental in moving forward with their divorces. For other participants, a tolerance for ambiguity seemed to be a contributing factor to their successful adjustment and relational competencies.

Mary Jo described the complete absence of ambiguity as instrumental in her decision to divorce. By her account, her spouse was unapologetic about his use of and addiction to drugs. Mary Jo pronounced, "It basically handed me a reason. There was no ambiguity, which was really beneficial, really useful."

In a similar vein, Hazel described the fair and unambiguous process of dividing marital assets, beginning with hiring the same attorney,

We did it on a very concerted effort for finances and a concerted effort for the kids. We hired one attorney and we processed through all of our financials. We processed through how the decree was going to work and we even brought in our financial advisor to look at everything in detail to break it up.

Augusta's description of her divorce process revealed many instances of becoming acquainted and even friendly with a sense of ambiguity about the future. She captured the unknown aspects of divorce for all the participants with her response to the

researcher's first question about successful adjustment with "I did know that everything happens for a reason." Augusta continued to reveal that she did not know the reason for her divorce, but saw divorce as the opportunity to learn. Later in the interview, she made this clear when she described having asked herself "What am I being called to?" and "What do I want?" Augusta acknowledged that she did not always know, but that she kept asking herself questions to "figure out the rest of my life." She said, "Little by little, this was a year-long process, but it really helped me form myself."

Lily noted that despite having hope, she embraced ambiguity in the following way, "I just have to play with my faith. I go to bed every night and give it to the universe because tomorrow is what happens tomorrow. The only thing I know is that the sun is gonna shine."

By contrast, June had more difficulties embracing the ambiguities of divorce. She spent the time immediately after divorce building her business and settling her children in college. She was briefly partnered with a man, but broke off the relationship because of his alcoholism. In this vein, she recalled,

So now that's been my newest dilemma, I'm the empty nester, and being alone. But, I got my whole life ahead of me . . . Maybe I'll meet somebody . . . It's a whole lot of ambiguity and I'm not sure I understood that as I was thinking about divorce. It seemed to be a better risk than staying in the marriage . . . and that part is true. It is better. Cause I don't go home to an angry person. I go home to my puppy dog.

Judith described how she learned from ambiguity. After her divorce, she became romantically involved with a man, whom she had broken with a month before our

interview. Judith described still feeling raw and heartbroken about the relationship.

Reflecting, she said,

It hurt being done with him and it hurt being there with him. I guess I learned a lot from it – cause, was it real [the relationship]? Was it not? There's a lot of question marks about that relationship. But what I learned was – it is what it is. Learn to let go. It was another experience to learn from. I cannot say I regret it.

Anabelle described the Jewish mourning ritual for her parents helped her manage much of the ambiguity in her life at the time. She recalled, “It was something predictable. Everything was predictable. Which was completely different than everything else in my life! So, it was not just the same people at the services, but the same tunes, the same prayers, at the same time.”

Marguerite demonstrated a lack of ambiguity about her decision to divorce. She stated, “Through past experiences [with her spouse], I knew that if I stayed in that relationship I would have relapsed.”

### **Use of metaphors.**

Almost all participants made use of metaphor to explain relationships and/or their process of divorce. A metaphor is figure of speech representing an abstract concept. The most poignant use of metaphor was Judith's chronicle of the loss, over time, of emotional connection between her and her spouse. She conveyed a striking image when she described a burning candle, “Little by little the candle goes down and then there's nothing. The candle burns out.”

Avery and Anabelle used metaphor to report their marriages as “bad investments.” Ella suggested a metaphor for the divorce process when she said, “Divorce

is like getting from one side of the sea to the other side of the sea.” Lily used a metaphor to describe the process of divorce by referring to jumping out of an airplane,

My entire life is like I’ve jumped out of an airplane without a parachute. Always. And everyone likes to know where they’re landing. How they’ll get there, and I’ve never been given that security . . . So, life is always changing for me, but one of the things I learned is that it still works. You still go on . . . and you make the most of it and you keep walking until you can’t walk anymore.”

With the preceding statement, Lily is not only describing a metaphor to her adjustment, but is also embracing ambiguity. Although she might not know exactly where she is going, she knows she will arrive somewhere and create a worthwhile life for herself.

Augusta illustrated a metaphor for her life after divorce, when she stated, “You break down. Everything shatters. Now you can pick up the pieces you want and create something new.” Anabelle gave a metaphor for her adjustment process with the phrase, “onward through the fog.” A powerful metaphor from Ella revealed the image of a dying plant to represent a woman who is not loved. She said, “You take this houseplant and starve it of sunlight and water, it’s gonna die.”

### **Transformation**

Transformation reflects the process of moving through divorce, and for some participants, began before the formal divorce process was underway. As each participant became aware of the dissolution of the relationship with her spouse, she began to plan practical details. She also began an emotional journey that contributed to her successful

adjustment to divorce. Transformation also incorporates participants' advancement of adjustment, work life, sense of agency, and finances.

Subthemes of the Transformation theme emerged as phases the participants completed during the process of divorce: the Early Phase included planning and strategizing for the divorce, the Emotional Journey revealed emotions about the divorce and expressions of self-empathy. The Later Phase of divorce emerged as participants moved forward with life, began or changed careers, and managed their finances.

### **Early phase.**

When participants discussed the aspects of their lives that were descriptive of the transition required to become divorced, it was labeled Early Phase. This included concepts of initiating and justifying the divorce, planning for divorce, and destroying the illusion of a satisfied marriage.

Eight of the ten participants initiated their divorces, describing longstanding emotional distance, substance abuse, the discovery of infidelity, or financial improprieties as contributing factors to their divorces. One participant, Judith, reported that she and her spouse came to a mutual agreement to divorce, and Lily described her happiness when her spouse announced he wished to divorce. Three participants reported packing their spouse's bags at the outset the divorce process. All participants endorsed planning for the divorce, and described planning as important for emotional wellbeing.

Illustrating her decision to divorce, Mary Jo recalled, "We were together 24 years and we divorced because I found out he's a drug addict and he refused to get any kind of help because he didn't feel he had a problem!"



Hazel described her experience of initiating the divorce; “There were a lot of concerns for me about how to strategically manage the divorce based on what was happening with him.” As for justifying the divorce, Hazel continued, “There was infidelity, he knew he was in the wrong.”

Ella noted that after experiencing years of emotional neglect, she had a moment of clarity when her spouse relayed a dream he had about her leaving him. She acknowledged, “I can’t do this anymore.” The statement was the first verbal expression of her intent to divorce. Similarly, June described the lack of connection that led to the divorce she initiated, and stressed,

I just wanted somebody to talk to me. Is that too much to ask? Just have a connection. He did not know how to have a connection . . . I need somebody to care about me. Who shows me or tells me . . . throw me a bone.

Marguerite characterized her process for deciding to divorce as “A long process, probably at least a year, to get the courage to even mention it.” Explaining the pretense of her marriage to a girlfriend, Lily recounted,

She thought I was making the biggest mistake of my life. She thought my marriage was idealistic. We’d have parties. People would come from all over to stay with us for weeks. She said, “You have such a perfect life, and you have all these resources!” I did a great job of hiding the mess my marriage was.

### **Emotional journey.**

Many of the participants, during their emotional journey, engaged in activities of self-empathy, such as going to counseling or joining a divorce group. Other aspects of

emotional journey were described as expressions of physical health, grief, spirituality, and having a sense of freedom.

All the participants expressed engaging in some form of self-empathy, whether joining a divorce support group, going to counseling, or obtaining medical care. The properties of self-empathy included expressions of making decisions, engaging in meditation, honoring religious tradition, and learning to love herself.

Mary Jo and Lily described divorce support groups as beneficial to their adjustment. Mary Jo recalled, “I joined a divorce group and those women were awesome . . . we became very bonded.” Similarly, Lily said, “I went to Divorce Care . . . I was looking for friends.”

Participants Hazel, June, Marguerite, and Ella, revealed that “going to counseling” during and after the divorce process contributed to their successful adjustment. Hazel recalled,

To be able to have a lot of introspection and reflection and spending time working on myself, doing different things. Doing a lot of self-care was really important for my relationship with myself . . . I did a lot of EMDR . . . I was doing yoga, I was floating a lot – zero gravity floating, I tried mindfulness.

June, while describing the repair of her relationship with her son, tearfully acknowledged the benefit of counseling when she said, “I’m going to counseling for this exact issue! . . . It [relationship with son] is in a good place now.”

When Marguerite was asked during the interview about how she made a successful adjustment, she emphasized, “Through intensive therapy. I started out three

times a week.” Ella captured the concept of counseling and adjustment with this statement “I had a phenomenal counselor, Dr. [name].”

When discussing physical health as related to their divorces, Augusta and June recalled aspects of their health as they encountered divorce. These participants represented another aspect of the emotional journey of divorce. In Augusta’s words,

I developed 21 physical symptoms. Went to my doctor, sure I had cancer and was dying. I meant I had numb patches, my hair was falling out, even my hearing was dimming, my eyes were dimming. I had cramps, pain, the weirdest, oddest things. And my doctor said, “You have stress.” And I nearly punched him. I thought, “Are you kidding me?” So, I went to a different doctor. He said, “You have stress.” This isn’t stress! So, they sent me to test my nerves. And there was a little disconnect. And she said, “It’s probably stress.” I thought, “Wow, you gotta be kidding.” And I learned how devastating stress can be.

Similarly, June explained that going through menopause affected her mood and health, and recalled she was tired and crabby, “I felt a little out of control because of the hormones.” According to June, her spouse was unsympathetic and impassively told her to “get it fixed.” June reported, “After we separated, and the hormones did come back, uh regulated, I felt great! I am not kidding. I don’t know if it was the burden lifting because of the hormones or him, but I felt so good.”

Marguerite revealed that her newfound ability to recognize and acknowledge her feelings was an important component of her physical health, “I feel I’m very healthy physically and emotionally. I feel my feelings now, I let my feelings out.”

Recognizing and managing grief was an important concept of the emotional journey during and after divorce. Some participants recalled grief at the loss of what their marriages could have been or the loss of the marital relationship. June captured many participants' sentiments about grief over what the marriage could have been, "I had grief over what I had wished the marriage was."

For other participants, grief occurred before the decision to divorce arose. June said, "I was mourning it before it even ended. I don't have a loss over the marriage, I have no regrets." For Mary Jo, becoming aware of her spouse's true nature represented a loss. She said, "The delayed sense of loss and grief was the delayed realization of who he is. I really feel like I was dumbstruck at this person. And looking back . . . he really did put on quite a mask." For Hazel, discovering her spouse's infidelity provoked a sense of loss and grief. Hazel recalled, "I think there was more loss and grief prior to me filing . . . based on the perspective of infidelity."

As Anabelle discussed grief as part of her emotional journey, she acknowledged her spiritual faith in Jewish tradition as being instrumental to her adjustment process. Anabelle lost both her parents during the time of her divorce and expressly stated that grieving her parents in the Jewish tradition of *Shiva* and regularly attending services gave her a sense of peace and calm that she desperately needed during this time in her life. In her words,

Shiva is the first seven days, and then for a year you go every day and say the mourner's prayer for the deceased relative. So, I was going like clockwork, every day at 6:00 p.m. I saw the same comforting people there. We didn't really talk about it, but it was a big, big, big savior for me. So, I went on Saturday mornings,

and sat by myself . . . on purpose I didn't go sit with my friends. Sat by myself and called that my space, you know? Did that consistently for a year. And went every afternoon to the little 17-minute service, and that was probably my biggest savior, really.

The sense of freedom participants experienced during and after the divorce process was another integral aspect of participant's emotional journey. The following are excerpts depicting this concept. Lily explained, "I cried more than I've ever cried . . . it was a good, therapeutic thing to cry. I knew my life was going to start." Marguerite noted positive feelings and stated, "I felt a sense of independence. I didn't have to look over my shoulder anymore." Similarly, Mary Jo declared, "It's not just new relationships, it's new experiences. Life really does seem so much better. I mean, things are just more forward now, more positive." And finally, Hazel affirmed, "I've gotten to this place where I feel so empowered. I have so much more confidence in what I'm doing, personally and professionally."

### **Later phase.**

In the later phase of adjustment, participants referenced insights they had gleaned: work and career choices, personal agency, and their finances.

Participants described insights they gained as they experienced a change in awareness resulting from their divorces. The following excerpts from participants illustrate the insights they achieved. Mary Jo recalled this particular insight:

I'm realizing it's not just one gender. I was on a "men suck" spree for a long time, and I'm now realizing . . . women can be pretty awful too, and it's really just

human beings. And that has helped me let go of this anger I have toward the entire half of the human race.

Hazel gained insight about how she might have made different choices regarding her finances:

Don't depend on that person in your life [spouse]. And you need to have a relationship with money, and you need to focus of what it is you want in life.

There's a piece of advice I wish I'd given myself.

Augusta acquired insight about her behavior during the divorce process. She recalled, "I realized I burned a lot of people out. And I was over the top hysterical . . . I realize how bad my reaction was – terrible." Judith achieved equanimity through insight, and stated, "I think I can say I'm at peace . . . I don't have to pretend. I am me now, completely." Avery noted that it was not until after her divorce that she gained insight about the true nature of her marital relationship, and recalled, "We never really had a real relationship. I didn't realize it at the time." June's insight evolved after years of attempting to influence her former spouse's behavior. She recalled, "You can't change other people. I think I had to realize I really couldn't change him . . . I thought I could!" Anabelle's insight after the fact was, "I made a bad investment when I married [former spouse]." Marguerite recalled finally allowing herself to express her emotions: "I allow myself to feel my feelings." And finally, Ella revealed her insight about being happy, "Realizing that so many things in our world are out of our control, but what is under control is how we choose to feel about it. And choosing happiness every single day."

**Work life.** Work life represents the role of work and professional career in successful adjustment to divorce. For some participants, work was a key component to

emotional wellbeing; for others, work served the purpose of distraction, necessity, or moving forward with her life.

About work life, Mary Jo reflected on the stability of her profession, and stated, I'd been smart enough my entire life to get my career in line so that . . . I could take care of my kids. I don't necessarily like my profession . . . but it pays really well . . . I make sure to be financially sound. As an engineer, I make enough money to make sure the kids are taken of.

Hazel changed professions while still married. She had been a graphic designer and went back to school to obtain a Master's in counseling. After her divorce, she opened a counseling practice. "I feel so empowered, I have so much more confidence in what I'm doing . . . I'd love to travel overseas and practice overseas. Maybe do EMDR and neurofeedback in a foreign country."

Augusta had been a nurse and then a stay-at-home mom until her divorce. About her work life, Augusta said, "I didn't want to go back to that [nursing]. I wanted something happier." She started the Club, which she reported as being hugely satisfying. "From that I got a bunch of new friends, and a lot of satisfaction . . . there's a lot of friendship groups that formed." The social club led Augusta to her current career of hosting a divorce recovery support group. "It's 10 weeks. We're following a book. I add to it. And they feel it so quickly that the feedback, it's instantaneous."

Lily spoke of "still searching" for fulfilling work.

Judith was a teacher 20 years before her divorce, and left the profession after the birth of her third child. Because her former spouse continues to support her financially, Judith does not have to work to earn a living. A longtime runner, after her divorce she

organized a running group to teach and encourage new runners. The group is free to all who wish to run mornings at 5:00 a.m. “We called it the Morning Crew . . . It’s not about me, it’s about helping others. I spread the word, even if you come out just to walk. What’s important is to get together as a group.”

June described immersing herself in her profession as a way to adjust to divorce. She recalled, “I threw myself into my work.” In a similar vein, Anabelle described the relief of having rewarding work. She recalled, “I had an awesome job . . . I didn’t have somebody calling me [former spouse], yelling at me on the phone . . . I just appreciated it so much . . . even when it [the job] was stressful or frustrating.” Marguerite described reaching a financial settlement during her divorce and moving on to a new profession. She noted, “I’m going back to school for social work and I’m about two semesters from graduation . . . Best thing I ever did.”

***Personal agency.*** Virtually all participants described a sense of personal agency. Broadly described, personal agency describes how participants discussed moving forward after divorce, undertaking new behaviors, and having confidence in their decisions as newly single women. Mary Jo’s sense of personal agency was evident in the excitement she described at undertaking a new interest after divorce. She stated, “I started a rock band. We’re starting to get out there. We have our first gig!” Hazel’s sense of agency came from recognizing her independence. She declared, “I have zero interest in remarrying.” Augusta’s sense of agency came from confidence in herself when she said, “I have a belief in myself that I can do anything.” Judith described how she experienced the bomb attacks at the 2013 Boston Marathon and became fearful of running outdoors. The experience inspired her to help other runners and gave her a sense of agency:



It became hard for me to get up and out the door at 5:30 . . . I started a little group . . . and now my main goal is to motivate others to run . . . I want them to understand they can do whatever they want as long as you put your mind to it.”

Lily’s sense of agency came from her positive attitude toward her reduced financial circumstances. She said she does not “despair.” Furthermore, “I’ve never been richer or poorer in my entire life.” Avery’s sense of agency came when she was offered a teaching position at Columbia, “It was unusual to get [the position] at the age I was. But I loved the job and I was able to settle with the students there.” Similarly, June’s display of agency was in her resolve to build her business. She said, “I made an analytical decision to open a group practice. To have other people work for me so that eventually I could take some time off.”

After having been betrayed by a female friend whose family members were her family’s closest friends, Anabelle illustrated her sense of agency by going out of her way to find new friends for herself and her children. She said,

We needed to jump to new friends. Which included inviting them over for dinner. Just having new people. They [the children] were afraid of making new relationships or having new people to the house. Which is why I thought we should do it, because not everyone is going to be like that.

Similarly, Marguerite’s agency explained the importance of modeling healthy relational behavior to her daughters. She recalled, “For me to walk away from that [marriage], and not allow that [emotional abuse] was huge . . . There is the possibility to model my current relationship [to them].” And finally, Ella’s sense of agency was evident

when she declared, “Failure to plan is planning to fail. And it’s not just in sales, it’s in life. And I think it’s true in divorce and post-divorce . . . you have to plan to succeed.”

***Finances.*** Participants discussed the various aspects of managing their fiscal situations after divorce. The financial impact was a distinctive feature of adjusting to divorce for the participants. For the most part, women reported having access to resources, such as a sense of agency, their intelligence, and their knowledge of the business world, which ensured that most their financial needs were met after divorce. Having financial needs met contributed to participant’s successful adjustment. A few reported struggling to manage their finances, but, nevertheless, reported successful adjustment.

About her finances, Mary Jo recalled,

I make sure to be financially sound . . . I make enough to make sure the kids are taken care of . . . I feel kind of trapped there, because I know he is not there financially. He is not going to provide for them.

Hazel described taking action to improve her understanding of money. She said, “I think my relationship with money is still a little bit skewed . . . It needs work . . . I’m going to a workshop specifically for women and money.” Hazel continued to discuss her thoughts on her financial situation, stating, “When I think about ‘How am I going to pay for this?’ Or, ‘Can I really afford to be independent, be my own boss? How am I going to retire?’”

Augusta described being unorganized with her finances, and said, “I’m surprised I’m not better with my money. And I’ve gotten myself in debt because of it.”

Judith reported no differences in her financial situation after divorcing, and said, “Arthur was always supportive of me financially. He never let go of the financial support.”

During her interview, Lily expressed great distress about the financial settlement of her divorce. She contended her former spouse lied about their finances and cheated her out of a fair settlement. Despite her unhappiness, Lily reported feeling grateful to have had a financial advisor during the divorce process. Lily stated, “He gave me a budget. And regardless of my budget, I spend as little as I can.” Later, about finances, Lily explained that even though she earns very little money, she has many friends who take care of her financially. She said, “I’ve never traveled more in my life. I make \$12,000 a year. I’ve been to London twice this year . . . I went to Iceland . . . My trips are paid for by my friends.”

Echoing Lily’s expression of frugality, Ella explained that after her divorce, she “learned to live below my means . . . I had hardly any credit card debt.” Furthermore, Ella reported feeling relieved from the financial strain of her marriage and noted she and her former spouse were frequently on the brink of financial disaster, and stated, “There was one time we saved the house from being sold on the courthouse steps by an hour.”

Avery emphasized that finances were always a source of stress, and said, “I always worried about money . . . I hated to have any bills unpaid . . . it was a rude awakening to know my husband would charge things here and there and not even be concerned with paying for things in a hurry . . . so money has always been an anxiety to me.”

About managing the financial aspects of divorce, June revealed she had been diligent about putting money away even while she was married. She said,

In the years preceding my divorce, I made sure I had some money in my own fund, in my own name. Separate property. It was my money I was earning . . . I started squirreling away, it wasn't even a whole lot . . . a little bit of cushion . . . I felt protected.”

Anabelle related that while she grieved the death of both parents during her divorce, she also reported that some good came of it in the form of an inheritance. The inheritance allowed Anabelle to buy her spouse's interest in their home and have a cushion for the future. She said, “I told him, ‘I'll buy my part of the house’ . . . and for about a year and a half, I lived on the money from my parents . . . after I got work again, I haven't touched it.”

And finally, Marguerite described having very successful business and negotiating well for herself during the divorce. She said, “We built four sports bar restaurants . . . I did well financially before I divorced . . . I knew business and I was very careful about that process before I got divorced.”

### **Relational Competency**

The Relational Competency theme incorporates the significant factors associated with a participant's interactions and relationships with others. The manner in which she navigated the lack of mutuality in her marital relationship, the changing nature of the relationship with her children, the rupture and often repair of relationships as a result of divorce, and the relational resilience and mutuality exhibited by participants, are included in Relational Competency.

**Lack of mutuality.**

The subtheme of lack of mutuality refers to participants' description of their feelings of disconnection or emotional distance from their spouses. Jordan (1991) discussed the characteristics of imbalances in relational mutuality. In heterosexual couples, this often manifests when the woman complains the man is not emotionally present and does not express interest in his own or her inner experience (p. 90). In speaking of this subtheme, all participants disclosed feelings of disconnection, loneliness, and emotional neglect in their marriages, prior to the decision to divorce. Similarly, participants each expressed a profound sense of unhappiness in their marriages that spurred her to take action.

When discussing lack of mutuality, Lily provided the most poignant example when she said,

We didn't interact together. I served him. There was nothing in it for me. I was looking at retirement – his retirement. I was a housewife . . . and I decided I didn't like the picture, and told him, "We've got to make some changes for retirement so we can interact together." And then he said, "I do want a divorce." And I was very calm about it. I said, "Then ok, let's go."

Marguerite spoke about recognizing her dysfunctional marriage after she completed treatment for addiction. She said, "I knew if I stayed in that relationship [her marriage], I would have relapsed."

Ella described an absence of love and affection in her marriage. She recalled, I knew that I wanted love in my life, because I'd been years and years, even though I was married, I didn't have love in my life . . . He was a non-participant

in our marriage . . . He had an affair – with his television and the remote control and the recliner.

Likewise, Mary Jo emphasized her unrequited desire for connection with her spouse when she reported,

He’s a trained chef . . . I wanted him to teach me how to cook. He never would. He refused . . . I would attempt to teach myself. And then he would walk in and criticize me. Or laugh at me. Laugh and point. I remember that. I would put up with it or I would get mad, my feelings would be hurt . . . or he would do this thing like brush me aside and take over. But that’s just an example. He did that like so-o-o-o many places throughout the day. So many areas.

Avery revealed the disconnection in relationship between her and her spouse occurred very early in their marriage and remained in place for 23 years. She illustrated her point:

My husband and I were never really, really close. I guess I made a mistake. He was not very honest with me before we married. And very shortly after, his sister . . . told me a lot of things I didn’t need to know . . . it made me feel mistrustful, which I never got over. I thought, ‘What did I get myself into?’ but there were some good things about it, especially once the children were born. My father died when I was five and it was very dramatic for me not to have a father. I hated to give my kids a life with no father. But probably in retrospect, it would have been better to give them a life without a father, because he wasn’t a very good father.

Judith emphasized the gradual disconnection she experienced with her spouse, “I wanted more positive reinforcement from him, basically. You know, I’m a runner. I’d

like for him to have asked me, ‘Hey, how was your run today? Did you feel good?’ Or something positive for what I was doing.” Furthermore, Judith illustrated her efforts to warn her spouse about their loss of connection, “I told him, ‘I feel myself drifting away.’”

June affirmed the prolonged unhappiness and lack of mutuality in her marriage when she described its failure after two attempts. About the decision to divorce she said, It was a very long and painful, tortuous decision. We . . . were divorced before when the children were very little, because my husband has an anger management problem. He would put his fist through walls. Never, ever touched me, but just that trauma of seeing his fist go through the wall when you’re this close to it. He would slam doors and have fits. So he had no ability for communication ... He calmed down for a while and we reconciled [remarried]. But this last time, we didn’t have any fists through walls; it was just this ongoing emotional neglect and abandonment, within my marriage. He might have said the words, but there was absolutely no showing of it . . . I told him, “You have to show me, or do something. Do something with me.” He would sit in his room and read or he’d be on the computer. I’ve never been so lonely in my life.

### **Relationship with children.**

All the participants had children and all but Avery reported relational changes with their children during and after the divorce process. Participants spoke about ruptures in their relationships, wanting to safeguard their children’s emotional wellbeing during divorce, and being worried about the effect the divorce had on their children.

Avery was the sole participant who spoke very little about her children. Avery affirmed her children knew their parent’s marriage was distant and claimed they were not

adversely affected by the divorce. When asked by the researcher, about the children's reactions to the divorce, Avery answered, "Nothing. They were home at Christmas and I told them at that time. We separated in January." For the balance of the interview, she did not again refer to her children in the context of the divorce.

By contrast, June, Marguerite, Augusta, Ella, and Anabelle recounted heartaches and difficulties maintaining mutually satisfying relationships with at least one of their children. June became emotional while discussing the rupture in relationship with her college-age son when she said,

My son did not do well. He was a sophomore in college when we began talking about it [the divorce]. It was his sophomore year he didn't talk to me . . . He decided he didn't need a mother . . . He even cut me off of Facebook . . . He had been told some things by his Dad. I don't even know all the details, but it didn't make me look good, and he thought that I was in the wrong . . . It took about three years to repair that relationship . . . We're back to being good . . . It may be 90% of where it was, which was, upsetting.

Marguerite recalled her distress about how two of her three daughters were informed about the divorce. Through tears she said,

I asked that we do it together in a loving compassionate way, but he ran to [name of city], told them, then immediately came back and left them in an emotional pile of blubbering mess . . . My daughters stopped taking to me for about a year and a half.



Augusta emphasized how carefully she planned to tell her daughters about her decision to divorce. She took the teenage girls to a luxury hotel, hoping the beautiful setting would soften the blow. She recalled,

I just wanted a different place to tell them . . . I was trying to speak slowly and choose my words very carefully, and she said, “Are you getting a divorce?” And I said, “Yeah . . . we’re going to try and work it out.” And she said, “What did you do?” Screaming at the top of her lungs . . . and then she turned it on herself, “What did I do?” And so the other one [daughter] is just kind of sitting there . . . and she [the first daughter] left . . . and stayed with her best friend for a week or two. That was bad . . . She was a senior, her focus was going off to college and having fun . . . And it made me so angry that this happened at that time. This should be focused on her.

Ella explained that she and her daughter struggled in their relationship with each other even before the divorce was announced. Ella said, “She had a hard time getting through the teenage years . . . [Daughter] and I were butting heads . . . I would draw a line in the sand . . . and 100% of the time, Dad would overrule anything I’d said.”

Because Ella and her spouse had hidden the true nature of their marital relationship, when Ella told her children about the divorce, they were shocked. Ella reported,

The kids were devastated. And the thing that was so hard for me was that [former spouse] had . . . positioned himself to be the kid’s best friend. And they rallied around their Dad. [Daughter] told me, ‘You are the most selfish bitch I have ever

known, destroying our home and family' . . . So that relationship really struggled for a few years.

Anabelle reported losing touch with one her stepsons after announcing her intent to divorce. The rupture meant not having contact with her grandchildren. She sadly reported, "One of the boys wouldn't talk to me and I was very hurt by that. My grandchildren, I couldn't even see for a couple of years." Anabelle and her stepson repaired their relationship, and she said, "Now I go over there, and when they come to Austin, they stay with me in my home."

Hazel captured the idea of wanting to preserve her teenage son and daughter's emotional wellbeing during divorce when she said,

It was hard for them . . . I offered them the opportunity for the choice, but I really pushed for them to come with me . . . He wasn't mentally stable, and it wasn't a good place for them to stay there with him . . . I was concerned for their safety, to stay in that environment.

Hazel also best represented the participant's understanding that their children also suffered during divorce when she said, "I never had any idea there would be this much collateral damage, especially on their relationships, cause that was what was important to me."

### **Relational resilience.**

The subtheme of relational resilience refers to participants' ability to navigate complex aspects of relationships with others. Jordan (1995) referred to "'relational awareness' as an understanding of the effect of self upon others, and of others upon oneself. Relational awareness is the ability to "monitor the energy and flow in the

relationship itself” (p. 5). In this study, relational resilience appeared, as participants were open to the changing nature of relationships. Participants reported repairing relationships with their children and others, coping with the challenges of their grown children moving forward, and managing the co-parent relationship with their former spouses.

June and Anabelle gave emotionally charged accounts of how they worked to repair disconnection with their children and grandchildren. June recalled her difficulties accepting her son’s silence the year she divorced. She tearfully explained how she reached out to her son, including recruiting a girlfriend to visit the town where June’s son was attending college. She said,

I wouldn’t let him blow me off. I knew part of it was developmental . . . I would reach out periodically, so I knew he knew I was thinking about him . . . I would rotate my variety of communication, so that it wasn’t too much of any one thing . . . When he wasn’t letting me see what he was doing via Facebook, I would ask my mom. She could still see him, and she would tell me he’s fine . . . But the hurt was pretty bad, so I got my girlfriend to go with me to [city] . . . I just needed to see my boy, and she was really helpful to navigate, not a peace treaty, but we had a meal with him on one day and a meal on the second day . . . That’s not a lot of time to spend with your kid, but it was the first step towards things getting a little bit better. Even though we didn’t talk about the relationship, he knew I cared . . . She [friend] helped with the perspective and to take away some of the hurt.

Anabelle recounted her distress at losing and rebuilding connection with a stepson and grandchildren. She described receiving advice from an Aunt about how to maintain connection with the grandchildren. Anabelle said,

She told me, “Always come bearing gifts, you’re the Grandma.” So, I kept trying to, without getting in their face, without trying to come over. I would send gifts to the kids and I would send them holiday greeting cards, and respond on Facebook to things that were great. I was just always there, but not trying to be in their face.

With emotion, Anabelle explained how her stepson came around after the divorce.

She recalled his words to her:

[Stepson] said, “I’m so sorry Anabelle, but I really felt for a while that I had to choose between you and Dad and I didn’t want to make Dad mad . . . If I made Dad mad, he would run away . . . But I knew that if I was not nice to you, you’d be there for me.”

Ella and Judith best captured the changing relationships with their adult children. Ella recalled the sense of emptiness she felt when she divorced and her adult children had moved in with their father. She said, “Motherhood was such an important part of who I was, and then all of a sudden, the kids move back in with Dad . . . there’s this nucleus of a family and I’m not part of it.”

About her children, she said,

I will say we have a good relationship now. Are we as close as some mothers and daughters? No. But we are closer than other mothers and daughters. So I’m happy where we are. And I know she will mature and get wisdom under her belt . . . And I would say I have as good a relationship with my 28-year-old son ... as any parent does . . . He comes to see me . . . He may understand a little more.

Judith reported relational resilience regarding her children’s disappointment at hearing about the divorce, and how open communication helped them understand each other. She recalled,

They kept begging me to think about it, and once I told them how I felt and why I felt like Dad was not . . . yeah, the financial was there, but that's not everything. I wanted the emotional. So yeah, it affected our relationship, but as soon as they realized I was happy, that's what mattered to them.

In a similar vein, Judith reported how important it is for her and her former spouse to model a cooperative relationship to their children and grandchildren. She said,

We got four kids and three grandkids. I guess we both grew, and we learned the mistakes we made. At least now we're more amicable, that we can do things together. We can spend holidays together, at least for the sake of the kids and grandkids. To give a good role model for them.

Hazel told of navigating her relationship with her former spouse as they co-parented and then drawing a boundary when the relationship became unhealthy. She reported,

I really wanted more than anything to be in a relationship with him to support his mental health . . . we attempted to stay grounded with the kids, to continue to communicate . . . He would come to [city], and we would go out to dinner with the kids. But the minute I started seeing someone . . . our relationship flipped.

There were threats, verbal threats . . . to me, to the man I was dating at the time . . . I realized I had to completely cut him off. And I gave the kids a choice too. I told them, "You have a choice to make in your relationship with your father . . . I am no longer going to be in communication with him."

**Relational mutuality.**

This subtheme refers to participants' recollections of reciprocal feelings of understanding and acceptance in their relationships. Jordan (1991) wrote that relational mutuality can "provide purpose and meaning in people's lives" (p. 81). It is the mutual feeling of being impacted by another and vice versa. Relational mutuality appeared in numerous recollections by participants, including support from family and friends during the divorce process, in new relationships formed during or after divorce, and in participants' experiences with dating and sexuality.

Avery was unique in her description of relational mutuality from colleagues. She described relational mutuality when she sensed that, without words, her colleagues supported and accepted her decision to divorce. Avery's feelings of support and acceptance were unique in that she divorced in 1971, an era when divorce was less common and more stigmatized. Avery reflected,

I never discussed it [my divorce] with them. Our office was small . . . so everybody knew each other's business, and I guess they all knew I was getting divorced . . . We supported each other all the time, through everything. I remember when I came back from court and I was divorced, a couple of guys, whose desks were near mine, were clapping for me.

In a similar vein, Anabelle recalled relational mutuality she received from synagogue members while simultaneously navigating her divorce and grieving the loss of both parents. Anabelle recalled,

They didn't talk about it and I didn't talk about it. But it was supportive. They knew that I was divorced because it was a synagogue. The strength came from my

reaffirming that the synagogue was someplace where he [former spouse] wasn't going to be, and there [at the synagogue] were friendly, nice folks where I could talk about the divorce or not, and it was okay.

Several participants recounted experiencing relational mutuality with family members, especially parents, namely mothers. Mothers were described as fostering the most relational mutuality in guiding the participants through the divorce process. Excerpts from the following participants' transcripts best illustrate the subtheme of relational mutuality.

Hazel stated, "My relationship with my mother was very supportive. She would listen; she'd give me perspective a lot. That was a very, very important relationship."

In a similar vein, Judith shared: "My mom . . . she really supported me. She didn't judge me because I did wrong. She always supported me."

June described how "Having supportive parents . . . Just to know that they're there for me, was very therapeutic. She [Mom] would say, 'I don't know what to say to you, but I can listen.' That's it, Mom. Thank you!"

Marguerite recalled,

They [my family] were very supportive as to, "If there's anything you need, we're here for you emotionally, or anything else you need, we're always here for you."

And I have two sisters-in-law that would call me and talk to me, and offer emotional support.

Augusta endorsed relational mutuality of three girlfriends during the divorce process:

My social life got very small. It was just the three girls who really stood by me.

They came over and went through my pills to make sure I was taking my vitamin pills, my anti-depressant, and this and that.

Mary Jo recalled making friends more easily after she divorced, and described co-creating relational mutuality came more easily for her. She explained, “There’s this whole population of divorced women in their 40’s that are dying to get out and do fun things and I’ve had no problem making friends.” Similarly, about her divorce recovery group, Mary Jo said about relational mutuality, “Those women were awesome. We would share our stories, and we became very bonded.”

Lily recalled how she experienced relational mutuality in the strangest of places. She said, “I believe the universe gives you what you need just when you need it.” Lily described how she experienced relational mutuality when,

An Uber driver that turned out to be a practicing Shaman gave great compassion and advice. Someone I met at a party who was going through the same thing, and a woman at the church where I took my Divorce Care course.

Ella experienced relational mutuality in her newfound sense of sexuality with a romantic partnership. She described her newfound sexuality in this way:

I had an experience that woke a sleeping dragon that I didn’t even know was there. And I am making up for those 20 some odd years, and it is amazing! If anyone had ever told me that sex could be this amazing, I’d have said they were lying. If anybody had ever told me that my body could do what I thought happened only in fantasy books, I would have argued that point! Yeah, [new spouse] has definitely tapped into something I didn’t know existed.



### **Most Influential Factor Contributing to Successful Divorce**

The researcher concluded each interview by asking participants what they considered the most influential factor contributing to their successful adjustment to divorce. The responses varied greatly and the following excerpts from participants' interviews provide a glimpse of their interpretations of successful adjustment.

Mary Jo emphasized throughout the interview the importance of time and completing the divorce quickly. It was not surprising that she noted this factor as the most important in her adjustment. She said,

I think the most significant factor was that I moved the divorce so quickly. It didn't drag out. As result, I feel like I got a chance to start my new life pretty quickly. That is huge. And then the other factor, was getting in this divorce group and finding women . . . going through the same thing.

Hazel contended that the most important factor was "self-care." She said, That was so important for me to re-ground myself. Had I not done that, I'd probably be a hot mess now. I think too, getting into a healthy relationship with someone who is encouraging . . . who supported me and gave me encouragement.

Augusta contended that the most significant factor in her adjustment was two girlfriends who encouraged her to reflect on her role in the dissolution of her marriage. She said,

They really know the importance of looking within ... These spiritual girls knew how to heal and knew you need at some point to own part of it ... They said, "If you don't forgive yourself you can't forgive him" . . . But I thought I was the perfect wife and mother . . . years later I realized I wasn't at all.

Judith reflected upon the importance of running thorough her adult life. She emphasized that running was the core factor in her adjustment to divorce. Judith illustrated her point, saying, “It [running] has always been there. It’s something you just put on your shoes and go out. I’d cry, I’d laugh . . . and I’m by myself. It’s my time, and it’s healing.”

When Lily was asked about the most significant factor contributing to her divorce adjustment, she said, without hesitation, “Faith.” She continued, “It has not let me down. I accept things as they are.” Avery, as well, did not hesitate to name the most important factor of her divorce adjustment and stated, “That I was busy, and I’ve always loved my job . . . I really like the work and the work never seemed like work. It just seemed like what it was my pleasure to do.”

June touched on the importance of family when referring to the most significant factor of successful divorce adjustment. She recalled, “Having supportive parents. They’d seen their daughter be very unhappy. That was probably the biggest factor that helped me . . . I would call my mom almost every day . . . I had good role models.”

Likewise, Anabelle conveyed the importance of role models, and the model she wants to be for her children. She emphasized,

What better time to do it than now.” The most significant factor contributing to her adjustment was, “I thought beyond me a little bit. But also, my kids need to see me taking care of me. Need to see me taking care of them.

For Marguerite, the most significant factor contributing to her adjustment to divorce was a specific point in time. She revealed, “The morning I woke and realized I am myself, my own person and independent.”

Ella recalled the most significant factor contributing to her adjustment to divorce was that

I was not willing to accept anything less in my life than big love . . . I made the decision to surround myself with people who loved me and supported me, and get rid of the negative things in my life, and the things that brought me down . . . I was not willing to accept brokenness . . . I was going to find joy in my life and happiness, no matter what the picture looked like. I didn't stop, and I'm still not stopping. It'll be a journey 'til I die.

### **Discussion**

The grounded theory generated by this study represents an explanation of midlife women's successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage. Constructivist grounded theory emphasizes interpretation of experience, and according to Charmaz (2014), "gives abstract understanding greater priority than explanation. Theoretical understanding is gained through the theorist's interpretation of the studied phenomenon" (p. 230). Through the process of analysis and constant comparison, the researcher was able to generate the following theoretical statement: Women who successfully adjust to divorce after a long-term marriage do so through personal transformation as they encounter the divorce process, organize a frame of reference to explain the divorce process, and increase their capacities for relational competency. Existing divorce literature supports the abstract concepts of transformation and frame of reference (Dare, 2011; Degges-White & Myers, 2006; Gregson & Ceynar, 2009; Hilton & Anderson, 2009; Lloyd et al., 2014; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015; Sakranda, 2005). The abstract concept of relational competency is associated with the theoretical foundation of this

research, Relational Cultural Theory (RCT). The concept of relational competencies gained during divorce extends the research of Comstock-Benzick (2013), who called for more research on divorce from an RCT perspective.

A core concept of RCT is the importance of relationships as life sustaining for all human beings (Miller, 1976/1986). Furthermore, mutuality in relationships is the bedrock of growth-fostering relationships. Mutuality promotes connection and exchange, whereas a lack of mutuality results in disconnection and lack of communication. A lack of mutuality was evident in participant's declarations of marital discontent. Most knew for some time before broaching the subject of divorce that their marriages were non-salvageable. Lack of mutuality was expressed when participants described serving their husband's needs at the expense of their own, emotional neglect, or the lack of emotional connection.

Relational competency refers to the manner in which individuals are able to successfully navigate changing dynamics in relationships. All participants displayed a range of relational competencies with themselves and others as they moved through the divorce process. Some nurtured their relationships with themselves through self-care by obtaining counseling, changing careers, or even running. Other participants displayed relational competencies with their former spouses, family members, children, and friends. The most compelling results of the current study became apparent when participants discussed the impact of divorce on relationships, and the manner in which participants navigated relational changes. When describing the most influential factors contributing to their successful divorce adjustment, participants gave powerful accounts of their relationships with themselves or others, whether in the context of parents offering

support, or taking time for themselves to heal emotionally. It appears that women's relationships are crucial to their successful adjustment to divorce.

Participant June displayed an example of relational competency when she experienced a disconnection with her son. He shut down, and refused to speak to her for almost a year. June persisted, in various ways, to show her son she still loved and cared for him, despite their disconnection. Eventually, June and her son were able to talk about their disconnection, feel heard and understood by one another, and begin to rebuild their relationship. Similarly, Anabelle refused to give up on a silent stepson and her grandchildren when she divorced. With the heartwarming advice of an elderly Aunt, Anabelle persistently sought connection by sending cards and gifts for the children. Eventually, her stepson and grandchildren recognized and accepted her gestures, and the relationship was restored. These reconnections could not have happened without the participants having had some idea of the importance of relationships.

Divorce is a permanent rupture in relationship, a vital component of human existence. This research demonstrates that women who nurture relationships, and navigate relational changes, are able to count on those relationships during difficult times of relationship rupture.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

The purpose of this study was to generate a theory of midlife women's successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage. Individuals divorcing at midlife represent the largest segment of divorcing adults (Kennedy & Ruggles, 2012). Researchers have called for more research into the lives of midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage (Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015). Additionally, researchers suggested that understanding divorce from a Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) perspective (Comstock-Benzick, 2013; Dare, 2011; Perrig-Chiello et al., 2015) would broaden this theoretical approach.

It was posited that understanding how women, who divorced at mid-life after a long-term marriage, would aid educators and mental health professionals in their work with this population. Thus, the researcher chose to utilize constructivist grounded theory to answer the research question, "What are the experiences and relational processes of women who successfully adjust to divorce after a long-term marriage of 20 years or more?" The answers to this research question generated practical implications for educators and mental health professionals.

Utilizing constructivist grounded theory methodology, the researcher utilized purposive sampling to identify 10 midlife women who self-identified as having successfully adjusted to divorce after having been married for a least 20 years. Participants were interviewed in-person and their responses were analyzed to identify themes and subthemes that would generate a grounded theory of the experiences and

relational processes that helped them successfully adjust to their divorces. This grounded theory study has generated a hypothesis of midlife women's successful divorce adjustment after a long-term marriage. Results of the study contain information for educators and mental health professionals to consider as they teach students of counseling and provide counseling to midlife women who are divorce or have divorced. The intent of the researcher has been to extend previous research on divorce and to answer the call for more research into the experiences of midlife women who divorce after a long-term marriage. In this chapter the researcher will illustrate the ways educators and mental health professional can understand and facilitate midlife women's successful adjustment to divorce.

### **Implications**

The constructivist grounded theory uncovered by the data in this study was: "Women who successfully adjust to divorce do so through personal transformation as they encounter the divorce process, organizing a frame of reference to explain the divorce process, and by increasing their capacities for relational competency." There are multiple implications of the findings of this study for mental health providers and counselor educators, namely and not surprisingly, that successful adjustment varies among midlife women. Because participants defined their particular successful adjustments, the researcher was able to understand the manner in which adjustment unfolds from the unique perspective of each of the 10 research participants. Their narratives produced abundant, rich data from which to generate a grounded theory of successful divorce adjustment. The findings of this study provide deep insight to the range of experiences and relationships encountered by women who divorce after a long-term marriage. For

mental health professionals who find themselves counseling women going through divorce, and for counselor educators training counselors-to-be, this research informs their practice and teaching.

### **Mental health professionals.**

Mental health professionals can apply the knowledge generated by this study to enhance their knowledge about midlife divorce, and women's successful adjustment to divorce. Divorce adjustment is unique to each woman's experience. The nature of successful adjustment varies across women. Although participants recalled many positive events that contributed to their successful adjustment, they also named challenges they overcame or were still in the process of overcoming. Most became emotional while telling their stories. Mental health professionals counseling divorced women should not assume that expressions of negative emotions or current challenges are markers of unsuccessful divorce adjustment.

In this study, an important subtheme of Frame of Reference was the manner in which participants told their stories. For example, a participant would begin a statement in the first person ("I"), and switch to the second person ("you"), while still referencing herself. Pennebaker and Lay (2002) found that while the use of the first person plural is often a marker of group identity, it is sometimes a sign of emotional distancing. Conceivably, some aspects of explaining the divorce process are painful, and use of the second person may mitigate emotional pain or discomfort. When mental health professionals notice a pronoun shift, this information provides greater awareness of the client's potential emotional state. If appropriate, the professional might address the pronoun shift with the client.



The participants in this research study were healthy, educated, financially stable and able to tell a coherent story of their divorces. Mental health professionals should not assume that an absence of these characteristics means a woman cannot successfully adjust to divorce. It is imperative for professionals to remain open to all manner of experiences and relationships involved in a successful adjustment to divorce.

Furthermore, mental health professionals can advocate on behalf of divorced women. Community psychoeducation programs to address midlife divorce could be offered to educate women about the process of divorce. Important aspects of divorce that women may not know about include the legal options of litigation and collaborative divorce. Psychoeducation programs could also educate women about planning and strategizing for divorce, something the participants in this study described doing before initiating their divorces.

#### **Counselor educators.**

Educators can extend the knowledge generated about relationship changes during the divorce process, and the growth-fostering relationships encountered by successfully adjusted divorced women, to students training to be counselors. Furthermore, educators of RCT can offer a relational perspective of divorce, and the importance of relationships during divorce. Additionally, educators can encourage students to become knowledgeable about the wide range of experiences and personal interpretations that constitute successful adjustment to divorce. Students can be encouraged to read a wide range of scholarly literature about midlife divorce, to understand the divorce process.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The recommendation of the researcher for future research is to continue studying women's relationships after divorce. Participants from diverse backgrounds, such as women of color and women from varying socioeconomic backgrounds would surely have impacted the theory generated from this study. Furthermore, there are many iterations of the divorce process, beginning with the time before divorce, when discord and dissatisfaction in the marriage first appear. The process advances to the initiation of divorce, the interim circumstances of divorce, succeeded by the period of time following the legal termination of the marriage. In addition, while not present across all cases, two participants provided clear reasons justifying their decisions to move forward with their divorces. Future research could investigate the critical moment at which a midlife woman makes the decision to divorce.

There are innumerable possibilities for women's experiences of divorce. Additionally, future research should include participants from marginal populations, such as Lesbians, women with mental health issues, or women experiencing poverty, substance use disorder, and those with limited access to education and resources. Moreover, a positive outcome for divorce begs the question, "What do relationships look like for women who do not identify as having successfully adjusted to divorce?"

Finally, the researcher is not aware of any other research examining divorce from an RCT perspective. Future RCT studies of divorce would continue to broaden knowledge about the role of relationships and divorce adjustment.

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**Appendix A**  
**Participant Questionnaire**

## Appendix A

### Participant Questionnaire

Please complete the following demographic information if you are interested in participating in research about women's experience of divorce after marriage of 20 years or more.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Gender      Male              Female

Are you at least 40 years of age?                      Yes              No

How would you prefer to be contacted?

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ My phone number is \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_ My email is \_\_\_\_\_

How many years were you married? \_\_\_\_\_

How long have you been divorced? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you currently married?                      Yes                      No

I anticipate needing an hour to an hour and a half of your time to thoroughly interview you about your experience of divorce. It is possible that I may need to ask you additional questions after our initial interview in order to clarify your initial responses.

Do you agree to the research?

Are you willing, if necessary, to answer questions via telephone or attend another meeting lasting up to one hour?      Yes      No



As a co-participant in this research, you are entitled to a copy of the final project. If you would like an electronic copy of my dissertation, please provide the email address to which you would like this sent.

Yes, I would like an electronic copy of Dissolution of long-term Marriage: A phenomenological investigation. Email to: \_\_\_\_\_

No, I would not like a copy of the final research project. Initial here:

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix B**

### **Script for Colleagues to Refer Potential Research Participants**

## **Appendix B**

### **Script for Colleagues to Refer Potential Research Participants**

A colleague of mine is conducting doctoral research on women who successfully adjusted to divorce after having been married for 20 years or more. The purpose of this study is to explore the relational processes that facilitated the successful recovery of midlife women who divorced after long-term marriage.

If you are interested in participating in the research, I will give you the researcher's contact information. To be a participant, you must have been married for 20 or more years, have been divorced for at least two years, and to consider yourself successfully adjusted to your divorce. Here is how to contact Melanie Somerville, the principal researcher.

**Appendix C**  
**Social Media Posts**

## Appendix C

### Social Media Posts

Facebook post: Doctoral student is seeking female participants for research study. I am Melanie Somerville, Licensed Professional Counselor, and doctoral candidate at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas. My dissertation chair is Dr. Dana Comstock. I am conducting the research phase of my doctoral studies and I am seeking to interview a diverse population of midlife women (ages 40-60), who divorced after a marriage of 20 years or more. To be eligible, you need to have been divorced for at least two years and identify yourself as having successfully adjusted to your divorce. For more information about the study, and to be directed to a link to determine your eligibility, please email this dedicated account: [msomervilleresearch@gmail.com](mailto:msomervilleresearch@gmail.com).

Twitter post: Doctoral research seeks female participants successfully adjusted to divorce, 20+ years of marriage. Email [msomervilleresearch@gmail.com](mailto:msomervilleresearch@gmail.com) for link to the survey.

**Appendix D**

**Consent for Participation in a Research Study**

## Appendix D

### CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN A RESEARCH STUDY St. Mary's University

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled "Divorce after long-term marriage: A constructivist grounded theory study."

1. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences and relational processes in women that facilitate a successful adjustment to divorce after a long-term marriage.
2. I will be using the following research procedures: Live unstructured interview with approximately 8-10 women who divorced after at least 20 years of marriage. Women will have been divorced for at least two years, and will have identified themselves as having successfully adjusted to divorce.
3. I estimate that each interview will take approximately 1 ½ hours, with possible telephone or in-person follow up.
4. I do not foresee that you will experience any risks as a result of your voluntary participation in this project. In order to participate, you will have identified that you have made a successful adjustment to divorce, and thus, the interview process should be no more invasive than a routine psychological examination.
6. I do not foresee that you will receive any direct, personal benefit as a result of your participation in this project; however, your participation will allow social scientists to better understand the divorce adjustment process for mid-life women who divorce after 20 or more years of marriage. Such information can contribute to more effective counseling for mid-life women.
7. You have several choices regarding non-participation in this project: (1) you may decide not to participate at all; (2) you may decide to not to answer some of the questions; (3) you may decide to terminate your participation even after you have begun. Any of these choices is an option and there will be no adverse consequences should you decide not to participate, or if you decide to terminate your participation.
8. In order to maintain privacy and anonymity, your given name will not be used when explaining describing the contents of your interview. Participants will have the choice of selecting a pseudonym or having one assigned by the researcher.

9. The data collected from this study will be used for education and publication purposes; however, it will not be identified with you personally.

10. Any questions about this research, or any related problems, may be directed to the Principal Investigator, Melanie Somerville, MA, LPC, Doctoral Candidate, at email [msomervilleresearch@gmail.com](mailto:msomervilleresearch@gmail.com), or to the dissertation advisor, Dr. Dana Comstock, Professor in the Department of Counselor Education and Supervision, who can be reached at phone number (210-438-6400.)

11. ANY QUESTIONS REGARDING YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT MAY BE ADDRESSED TO THE ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD HUMAN SUBJECTS (210-436-3315). ALL RESEARCH PROJECTS THAT ARE CARRIED OUT BY INVESTIGATORS AT ST. MARY'S UNIVERSITY ARE GOVERNED BY REQUIREMENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT.

12. By answering the questions that follow in this survey, you give consent to be considered as a research participant in this study. If you do not wish to give consent or to be considered, please do not continue this survey.



**Curriculum Vita**  
**Melanie Somerville, M.A., LPC-S**  
**ms33085@gmail.com**  
**512.593.0583**

**Education**

2011 – Present – St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, TX (CACREP) – Doctoral candidate, Counselor Education and Supervision. Defense of research expected Spring 2017.

2013 – 2015 – The Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, Cleveland, OH – Advanced training in Gestalt therapy to extend the knowledge and practice of Gestalt theory and therapy.

2006-2009 - Texas A&M International University – M.A., Counseling Psychology.

1979-1984 – The University of Texas at Austin – B.A., Communications.

**Employment History**

July 2016 – present: Clinical Director, Driftwood Recovery, an 18-bed residential treatment center for adults presenting with substance use disorder and/or chronic pain. Duties include serving as a member of the management team, to develop programming and implementation of treatment, as well as ongoing management of organization services. Develop curriculum for chronic pain program. Carry a caseload of 6-8 clients and facilitate skills groups as well as process groups. See clients for individual therapy sessions. Coordinate with other professionals to create a discharge plan to support clients’ continued success in recovery from substance use disorder.

August 2013- present: Licensed Professional Counselor – Owner/founder of TherapyPlease, a private practice firm offering counseling services to adults, teens and individuals in recovery in Austin, Texas. Theoretical foundation rests on Gestalt principles of increased self-awareness, integration of mind and body, and the cycle of experience.

July 2012 – August 2013: Licensed Professional Counselor PRN – Nueva Vida Behavioral Health, San Antonio, TX. Provide counseling to clients who are experiencing a variety of psychological challenges including depression, anxiety and adjustment disorders.

January 1996 – August 2013: Practice Administrator/Licensed Professional Counselor – The Pain Management Clinic of Laredo. Responsible for hiring and supervision of employees, administration of and compliance with medical practice policies, including implementation of a chronic pain management program for individuals recovering from work related injuries. After obtaining LPC licensure, facilitated groups and saw individual clients in the pain management program. Furthermore, the physician referred patients outside of the chronic pain program for mediation of psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, grief, relationship difficulties and stressful life events.

Referrals were also accepted from physicians and community agencies outside the practice.

January 2010 – May 2011: Adjunct Instructor – Texas A&M International University, Laredo, TX. Instructed two semesters of undergraduate Introduction to Psychology, and assisted one semester in master's level Group Counseling class.

Fall 2009: Research Assistant for Gilberto Salinas, PhD, LPC-S - Submitted research proposal materials to university Institutional Review Board, and completed necessary follow up to committee requests. Also researched of current literature for material relevant to the research project, compiled and organized literature to present to the lead researcher, recruited research study participants, and administered research instruments to participants. Entered and performed analysis of research data in SPSS computer software.

July 2009 – May 2010: Co-group counselor for Baptist Children and Family Services. Co-facilitated bi-weekly group therapy sessions at colonias Larga Vista and Las Lomas, in Webb County, Texas. The groups were psychoeducational and process oriented for women residing in these communities. Sessions were conducted in Spanish and English.

### **Publications**

April 2014 - Lake Travis Life magazine, Learning from Olympic athletes

May 2014 - Lake Travis Life magazine, An inside look at the teenage brain

June 2014 - Lake Travis Life magazine, Caring for elderly parents

### **Community Service/Pro-Bono Work**

January 2013 – August 2013 – Hospice volunteer at Christus Hospice, San Antonio, TX. Provide caregiver respite to patients in hospice care.

August-October 2011 – Wellness process group for employees at STACADA, Laredo, TX. Group consisted of chemical dependency counselors and caseworkers, and met weekly for 10 weeks to discuss topics of self-care.

February-July 2011 – Implemented running for psychological wellbeing groups at Laredo Job Corps. This consisted of two, 10-week programs with different groups of adolescent girls. Groups met twice a week at the Job Corps campus, and occasionally on weekends to run local 5K races. Limited group and individual counseling was performed, as well as psychoeducation on mental and physical health topics.

February 2011 – Screening candidates for Running/Exercise/Mental Wellbeing group and two process/psychotherapy groups at Laredo Job Corps. This involved assembling measures for pre/post testing for psychological benefits, planning the group format and material and meeting with Job Corp staff to plan logistics.

July 2008 – December 2009: Volunteer counselor intern at Laredo Job Corps. Individual and group counseling to Job Corp students as referred by school counselors. This site was also used to obtain practicum and internship hours for Master's of Counseling Psychology program at Texas A&M International University. Contributed over 450 hours of community service, beyond practicum and internship hours.

January 2008 – December 2009: Student counselor at Texas A&M International University Community Stress Center. Individual, marital and family counseling for Laredo community members. This site was also used to obtain practicum and internship hours for Master's of Counseling Psychology program at Texas A&M International University. Contributed over 300 hours of community service.

### **Presentations**

2016

Leander Independent School District – Staff development  
Protecting children's psychological wellbeing during divorce

2015

Sage Recovery, Austin, TX – CEU presentation  
Topic: Understanding the teen brain

Starlite Recovery Center, Austin, TX – CEU presentation  
Topic: Using mindfulness in counseling

Westlake High School, Austin, TX – Staff development  
Topic: Introducing mindfulness to adolescents

2014

Texas A&M International University, Graduate (Master's level) Theories of Psychology class  
Guest Lecture: Gestalt theory

2013

Lake Travis Community Library, Have yourself a Zen holiday  
St. Mary's University, Graduate (Master's level) Theories of Psychology Class  
Guest Lecture: Gestalt theory  
Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, National conference, Denver, CO  
Poster Presentation: The fertile void: Planting the seeds of counselor development  
Association for Adult Development and Aging (an ACA division association), National conference, New York, NY  
Education session: The shame dialogues: Saying hello to men's shame in counseling  
Texas Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Midwinter conference, Austin, TX  
Poster Presentation: A Gestalt model of counselor development

2012 -

Texas Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Midwinter conference, Austin, TX

Poster Presentation: Using ego-analytic theory in supervision

2011

Job Corp – Laredo, TX, presentation to faculty and staff

Topic: Mindfulness and relaxation – their application to personal wellbeing

Job Corp - Laredo, TX, presentation to faculty and staff

Topic: Understanding and working effectively with teens

2010

Texas A & M International University Pathways Conference, Laredo, TX, Poster presentation

Topic: Group therapy in colonias – challenges and opportunities

2009

Serving Children and Adolescents in Need (SCAN), Laredo, TX

Topic: Mindfulness and relaxation – applications to counselor wellbeing

2008 – United Independent School District Parent’s Seminar, Laredo, TX

Topic: Mindfulness and relaxation – their relationship to personal wellbeing

Texas A&M International University College of Arts and Sciences Symposium, student presenter

Topic: Motivational Interviewing and its uses in working with substance abuse

### **Associations**

Member, American Counseling Association

Member, Texas Counseling Association

Member, Texas Association for Counselor Education and Supervision

Member, Association for the Advancement of Gestalt Theory