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DIVORCED AND SEPARATED FAMILIES: SOME MOTHERS'

VIEWS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education at Massey University.

ORMOND MUNRO WILSON

1972.

ABSTRACT.

Forty divorced or separated women receiving either a domestic purposes benefit or a deserted wives benefit participated in an interview to determine some of the important issues facing their families. The results of these interviews were not intended to represent a total view of divorced and separated families but rather a tentative understanding of them so that guidelines on community action might be formulated with more insight. The information gained was supplemented by the views expressed in the preliminary survey and the representations in the reviewed literature. This was then used in the formulation of ideas for further research.

The women defined four major causes of marriage failure all of which were attributable to their(ex) husbands' behaviour; excessive drinking, physical violence, financial irresponsibility and adultery.

The provisions of the June 1972 budget had improved incomes but saving for the replacement of the more expensive household items was difficult. However, the security of a regular income since separation meant a marked improvement for most of the women. The monetary advantage accruing to those who rented houses or units as opposed to those in privately rented houses or flats, was quite marked. The women currently employed showed an above-average morale and seemed generally satisfied with this aspect of their lives.

The strongest features of the examination of health were the 60% of mothers who noted an improvement in health since their separation, the fact that birth order was a much more

important independent variable than sex when considering the children's health, and the general conclusion that the health of both mothers and children is likely to be better under the conditions of **single** parenthood rather than in an 'unhappy' but 'unbroken' home.

The **generally** low level of educational achievement for both the mothers and fathers contrasted with the mothers' generally high expectations for their children's educational achievement. This was consistent with the mothers' expressed satisfaction with the schools' performance.

About half of the mothers tended towards an introverted social attitude whilst the other half felt the desire to expand their social contacts. There was a generally low level of neighbour-contact but this could be partly explained by the high mobility of this group—just under half had moved house within the previous two years. The wider kinship group emerged as the strongest **single** source of assistance for the families studied. There was no clear emergence of one single type of desired assistance and it was found that for the majority of the women their needs could be defined as non-material. For 45% of the group leisure activity outside the home was almost non-existent.

A little under a half of the mothers found the effect of fatherlessness to be harmful to their children, but a majority considered that the father's absence had benefited the children. Both could be indicative of the damaging effects of the more extreme kinds of pre-separation tension. This

This was further manifested by the kinds of emotional disturbance reported among the children and their difficulties over social contacts. As might be expected, the older children were regarded as being much less willing to accept a step-father than the younger ones. For a large majority of mothers, the area of mother-child relations posed no unusual problems.

Over half of the mothers could be described as being well-adjusted to their single parenthood or that their adjustment was improving but 30% continued to be adversely affected by the separation. Only a quarter of the sample considered that remarriage would be undesirable under any circumstance, and one in ten professed to a lingering affection for their (ex) husband. It was demonstrated that the offspring of unhappy marriages were in turn more likely to experience unhappy marriages than the population at large.

Responses to the 'Cantril' questions showed the various differences among sub-groups of the sample particularly differences between the older women. Perhaps the most important single feature to emerge from this part of the study was the fact that the burdens of single-parenthood tended to fall most heavily on the shoulders of the women separated for two years or less.

The findings of this study left one impression more strongly than any others, that whilst difficulties and hardships persisted among divorced and separated mothers, these were a preferable alternative to the deprivations and indignities that prevailed for most of them before their husbands left home.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

This study was only made possible through the encouragement, co-operation, trust and assistance from many individuals, organisations and state departments.

In particular I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. Alan Webster, the staff of the Research Division of the Department of Social Welfare, and Mr. R. G. Walker of that Department's Palmerston North office.

I am also indebted to Miss E. H. Green of the Massey Library for her quiet efficiency and to Mrs. N. E. Bradley for her skill and patience in transcribing the text.

The people who participated in the preliminary survey gave insights and guidelines that were invaluable in determining the focus of this study. The benefit of their experience will always be appreciated. It is to the mothers who participated in the main survey that I feel particularly grateful. They believed in the value of the research and had the courage to give of their privacy to make it possible. I hope that their contribution has served a worthwhile purpose.

Finally, I especially thank my wife, Helen, for her untiring encouragement and support.

"The final justification for any accounting or explanatory concepts must be the extent to which they enable a person to understand the problems with which he is dealing in all their full-bodied, ongoing complexity without distorting them to fit some preconceived model he may have."

. . . . Cantril (1965)

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