

# The Primary Support Received by Recently Divorced Mothers<sup>1</sup>

*Mary E. Duffy*

The effects of divorce on the interpersonal relationships of women continue to concern clinicians and researchers. For most women, divorce severs a relationship that has provided some degree of intimacy and attachment (Weiss, 1976b), a shared worldview (Stephen, 1984), role sharing, and economic resources. If a woman, especially a single mother, does not have a social support network to respond to her needs, the potential exists for social isolation, role strain, and depression (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Richard, 1982). This article is a report of a study in which the investigator explored the types of support given by the primary support people of single mothers who were recently divorced for the first time.

## BACKGROUND

Early studies of the impact of divorce on social relationships focused on the quantity and quality of the social support networks of single mothers. Single mothers have many support needs: relief from the burdens of 24-hour parenting; emergency assistance; emotional support; advice; help with transportation, household tasks, and finances; and opportunities for social interaction: These varied needs reflect the types of issues that occur after divorce: (a) absence of a sustaining community, (b) loss of contact with similarly placed friends, (c) lack of support for a sense of worth, and (d) loss of emotional attachment.

The informal support network can be a primary source of help for single mothers. The hallmarks of the informal network are its ability to respond flexibly, especially early in the help-seeking process; endurance over time;

---

*Mary E. Duffy*, R. N., Ph.D., Assistant Professor, School of Nursing, Department of Mental Health, Community, and Administrative Nursing, University of California, San Francisco. Questions about this article should be directed to Social and Behavioral Systems in Nursing, University of Utah College of Nursing, Salt Lake City, UT 84112.

© 1989 Sage Publications, Inc.

676

mutuality; and a natural sensitivity that develops from shared life experiences, needs, and culture (Gottlieb, 1985). According to Weiss (1976b), three types of helpers are needed during a transition: the expert; the veteran, who has experienced the transition; and the fellow participant, someone in the same boat who can provide immediate reaction. The types of support provided by these helpers to single mothers were categorized by Gottlieb (1978) from a list of 26 helping behaviors. Emotionally sustaining behaviors promote an emotionally supportive environment; problem solving behaviors include the provision of new information or a new perspective and direct intervention to resolve the problem; indirect personal influence refers to the sustained availability of the helper; and environmental action is social advocacy or intervention on the part of the helper.

Recently researchers have begun to look at the specific relationship between who is providing the support and the types of support offered. For example, the support networks of women are likely to be anchored by family members (Milardo, 1987; Saunders, 1983), who tend to reinforce traditional values and stereotypical roles and to encourage stability (McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981). Friends, on the other hand, tend to promote growth and change, especially when new acquaintances act as role models. The value of friends seems to be their willingness to support without being critical and without interfering on a daily basis in the woman's life (Milardo, 1987). That same pattern of helpfulness and noninvolvement on a day-to-day basis was important for the positive adjustment of single mothers to divorce in a longitudinal study of parental support (Isaac & Leon, 1986).

The timing of support is an important influence on the types and amount of support needed (Jacobson, 1986). Attention must be paid to the source, type, and timing of support (Dimond & Jones, 1983), since all members of the support network do not contribute equally.

### **Primary Support Person**

The focus of recent research has narrowed from the generic units of support—family, friends, and others—to the role of the primary support person or confidant in a woman's support network. The presence of a confidant has been found to influence positively the psychological well-being of women. This type of close interpersonal relationship has been associated with a decrease in depressive (Miller & Ingham, 1976) and psychosomatic symptoms (Hall, Schaefer, & Greenberg, 1987). Although a husband or boyfriend has been found to be the specific supportive relationship that best protected women from the emotional effects of a stressful life

event (Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris, 1975), friendships have been found to compensate for the lack of a good spousal relationship (Eckenrode, Kochanevich-Wallace, & Miller, 1986); this was particularly true for a group of low-income, predominately black mothers (Hall, Schaefer, & Greenberg, 1987). In a study of single mothers, Duffy (1984) found that the primary support person was an important influence on the achievement of a woman's personal goals.

Although evidence exists to suggest an important link between the presence of a confidant and the psychological well-being of women, little is known about the supportive functions of the primary support person. Research is needed first to describe the types of support received by single mothers from their primary support people and then to relate those types of support to outcomes for the women. The study reported in this article addresses the first area of inquiry. The purpose of the study was to explore the sources and types of support given to recently divorced mothers by the person each woman identified as her primary support person. The research questions were:

- (1) Who do recently divorced mothers identify as their primary support person?
- (2) What types of support are provided by the primary support people of recently divorced mothers?

## STUDY METHOD

This study was designed to explore the types of support given to each single mother by the person identified as her primary support person. A semistructured interview was used in this descriptive study. Qualitative data were analyzed for content, and categories of support were developed.

## PARTICIPANTS

Study participants were identified through the divorce records of one county in northern California. All divorces are recorded by county in a public record; therefore, this method of participant selection is the best sampling technique (White & Mika, 1983). Since timing during a transition is an important variable (Jacobson, 1986), only mothers divorced recently—within 3 months of the first contact with the researcher—were selected to participate.

The women were contacted first by mail and then by telephone to determine their eligibility and willingness to participate in this study. A woman was eligible to participate if it was her first divorce and she had joint or sole physical custody of one or more children under the age of 18 years. Of the 141 women who met the eligibility criteria, 72, or 51%, agreed to participate in this study. Most women who refused said they were too busy.

The median age of the women was 35 with a range from 19 to 50 years. The majority of women, 82%, had at least some education at the postsecondary level. Incomes ranged from \$6,000 per year to \$216,000 with a median of \$21,800. However, almost a third of the women, 32%, had incomes of less than \$15,000 per year. Only one woman identified child support as her primary source of income; 75% of the women relied primarily on their own employment.

The median number of years married was 9.3 with a range from 6 months to 24 years. Separation and divorce—the time as a single parent—ranged from 3 months to 8 years with a median of 1.8 years. Although the women were contacted within the first 3 months since their legal divorce, the period of separation—time before the divorce—varied among the women. Just over half of the women, 57%, had sole physical custody of their children. Although the number of children ranged from one to four, 90% of the women had one or two children. The children's ages ranged from 6 months to 17 years. Eighty-two children (73%) were evenly divided between two age groups: 5 years old or younger and 6 to 12 years old. The remaining 31 children (27%) were teenagers.

#### DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected by a telephone interview during one year. The telephone interview was used because it can increase participation without compromising the research method (Dillman, 1978; Polit & Hungler, 1985). Women who moved out of the immediate area could be contacted by telephone anywhere within the United States. In addition, many single mothers are very busy and would consent only to a telephone interview because it could be scheduled after the children were in bed and without preparing for an interviewer to come into their homes.

Both demographic and support data were collected by a semistructured interview that lasted about 30 minutes. After each woman identified her primary adult support person, she was asked first about the types of support

she received from that person and then about what distinguished the primary support person from other people who supported her. The questions included:

- (1) Who is your most significant support person?
- (2) What is it about that person that makes her/him the most significant support to you?
- (3) What types of support do you receive from that person?
- (4) What is different about that person from other people who support you?

Research assistants were trained to conduct the interviews. An interview guide identified the major questions, and the research assistants were taught to probe for further information. For example, if the woman described her support person as "someone who is always there when I need her," the research assistant probed by asking the woman what she means by "always there" and to give an example of a time when she needed the support person and the support person's response. Interviews were recorded verbatim on an interview sheet. The principal investigator reviewed every tenth record and periodically monitored telephone interviews to assess the quality of the interviews and assure consistency among the interviewers. Further training by role playing and discussions was provided as needed.

## DATA ANALYSIS<sup>2</sup>

Descriptive statistics, analysis of variance, and content analysis were the primary methods of data analysis. Descriptive statistics were used to develop the demographic profiles of the women and their supports. Differences between the demographic data of the women and their supports and comparisons among the women regarding the sources and types of their primary support were analyzed by analysis of variance. Data about the characteristics and types of support were analyzed for content. Two coders conducted the content analysis using the following procedure. A random sample of interviews ( $n = 8$ ) was given to each coder and independently analyzed. Codes were compared and discussed to develop consensus on the codes and definitions. A second set of interviews ( $n = 5$ ) were then coded using the first set of developed codes and codebook. A third set of interviews were coded from the codebook and compared to assess reliability and validity. The remaining interviews were coded from the codebook (see Table 1). The result was 13 conceptual categories of support.

Once the data were coded by the 13 categories, a second level of coding occurred. The categories were grouped according to their related themes.

TABLE 1 Coding Procedure

<i>Substantive Data</i>	<i>Support Type</i> (first level of coding)	<i>Thematic Groups</i> (second level of coding)
Share a <i>mutual goal</i> of contributing to the world		
Share many interests, business, and parenting		
<i>Mutual</i> —She discusses her problems with me	Mutuality	Underlying quality
Nothing else defines our relationship except <i>me and him</i>		
<i>Can hear</i> my problems without going nuts— <i>not so involved</i> in my life as my family		
<i>Decides</i> what I need and pushes me	Distancing	Providing a perspective
<i>Outside perspective</i>		
<i>Frank</i> , not afraid to tell me what might hurt me but does so out of love		

Seven of the categories described underlying characteristics of the supportive relationship and six categories described direct support. The underlying qualities of support are the relationship characteristics that are continual between the woman and her primary support person. These qualities define the nature of the primary support relationship, although not all qualities were present in each relationship. For example, continuity defines the length of the relationship, and availability defines its frequency. These are components or qualities of the relationship but not something provided directly to the woman as support. These underlying qualities include emotional qualities such as loving and valuing. Affection (loving) and respect (valuing) are qualities that the supportive relationship is built upon and allow direct support to be given. The categories of direct support, i.e., assistance given to the

woman, were delineated into three areas, again by thematic grouping: creating an environment, providing a perspective, and giving direct aid.

## FINDINGS

Women generally chose other women as their primary support people. Most frequently these people were friends (44%) or parents (19%). Six women selected a professional counselor or therapist as the primary support person.

The nine categories of primary support were collapsed into four groups used similarly in previous research: ex-spouse/lover, relative, friend/work associate/neighbor, and professional (Hall, Schaefer, & Greenberg, 1987; Milardo, 1987; McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981). Friend/work associate/neighbor remained the largest category (49%), followed by relative (31%). While most relatives were women, i.e., mother or sister, the friend category was more evenly distributed between men ( $n = 15$ ) and women ( $n = 20$ ). Younger women selected relatives as their primary support people more often than did older women,  $F(3, 71) = 4.6, p = .01$ . Scheffe' post hoc analysis indicated that older women were more likely to identify their ex-spouse/lover ( $p = .05$ ), friend/work associate/neighbor ( $p = .05$ ), or a professional ( $p = .08$ ). The number of years as a single mother was not associated with the type of support person identified.

The primary support people were significantly older ( $\bar{x} = 42.3$ ) than the women ( $\bar{x} = 34.2$ );  $t(142) = 5.06, p = .001$ . Approximately half of the support people were either married or in a partnered relationship. Although their median educational level was the same as that of the women, 15 years, the median income of the support people ( $\bar{x} = \$43,557$ ) was significantly higher than that of the women ( $\bar{x} = \$28,195$ );  $t(141) = 2.48, p = .01$ .

The women had known their primary support people for many years and had contact with them frequently. Seventy-one percent of the relationships were more than 5 years old. Daily contact between the women and their primary support people occurred in 51% of the relationships and weekly contact occurred in 36%. Long-term acquaintanceship and frequent contact were important characteristics of these relationships.

### Primary Support

Two overall categories capture the importance of the primary support person: the types of support given to the woman and the qualities of the

relationship between them. These two categories defined the uniqueness of the primary support person when compared to other members of the support network. The following statements illustrate some of the important qualities of the primary support person: "He is frank and not afraid to tell me what might hurt me. He does so out of love." "She provides physical labor. Other people provide reassurance and emotional support." "It is a total trust situation. She is all-accepting of me with my faults. I am secure in the relationship. She is nonjudgmental and I can share the negative and the positive." "She has been through a divorce herself."

Thirteen categories of support were identified from the data. Broadly, these factors describe the underlying and direct support provided by the primary support person. The qualities of the underlying support are the characteristics that make this relationship special. These qualities are described as underlying because their existence is constant but not always spoken of or as evident as direct action. Valuing is an example of a present but unspoken characteristic of the relationship. The women know they are valued for who they are by their primary support people even though this is unspoken. Direct support is the assistance a woman believes she is receiving from the primary support person.

### **Underlying Qualities of the Primary Support**

The underlying qualities of the primary support were continuity, availability, mutuality, trusting, valuing, loving, and understanding. Table 2 lists these qualities of support and gives examples from the data. Continuity and availability are the length of the relationship and the frequency of contact. As stated earlier, most women had known their primary support people for more than 5 years. The history and familiarity that developed over time and frequent contact were important in these relationships. The women believed their primary support people knew a lot about them as individuals — not just as women who were divorced — and could respond to their needs as single parents with the advantage of past experience and a broad perspective. The following comments reflected this continuity: "She has knowledge of my childhood" and "History — he has known me for so long; seen so many sides of one another." Availability engenders more than frequency of contact. Although frequency of contact is an important characteristic of these relationships, availability also is an emotional security conveyed when support people respond to women's immediate needs. Women described their primary support people as "dependable, never lets me down" and "always there, at any time I need her I can call her."



TABLE 2 Underlying Qualities of Support

<i>Category</i>	<i>Substance Data</i>
1. Continuity	She has knowledge of my childhood History—he has known me for so long
2. Availability	Dependable, never lets me down Always there, at any time I need her I can call her
3. Mutuality	Reciprocal communication Mutual—she discusses her problems with me
4. Trusting	Honest to goodness truth
5. Valuing	Nonjudgmental. I can say what I want, good or bad  I never have to justify what I am going to do. She accepts me for being me
6. Loving	A strong bond Doesn't have any interest except for loving me
7. Understanding	We have a sixth sense about each other He is going through the same single parenting so there is an understanding

Mutuality is the woman's perception that the relationship is equal. The woman believes she not only receives support from her primary support person but also returns that support, for a mutual exchange. One woman described this support as "reciprocal communication." This quality of support would not be present in the primary support relationships that involved a professional helper, since those relationships are contracted to be unidirectional.

Trusting is the perception that the support person will not harm the woman and will want the best for her. This feeling allows individuals to be honest in the relationship since there is little concern that repercussions will follow in the forms of betrayal, judgment, or loss of the relationship. One woman described her relationship with her best friend as based on "honest to goodness truth. I could tell her that I robbed someone for food or money and she wouldn't turn against me."

Valuing is an affirmation of worth. The woman feels accepted for who she is including her strengths and her weaknesses. Respect and nonjudgmental or unconditional acceptance are critical components of valuing. Typical

comments describing this type of support were: "Nonjudgmental. I can say what I want, good or bad" and "I never have to justify what I am going to do. I don't have to please her. She accepts me for being me." For many women, valuing meant taking them seriously, especially their aspirations for the future. Many women believed that their aspirations had not been given serious consideration in the past. Their primary support people respected their goals and plans. One woman expressed this succinctly: "He listens to what I want to do with my future." Another woman felt her work was being taken seriously for the first time: "He accepts my interest in my work and supports it. This is the first time I have had this type of acceptance and support for my work."

Loving is a feeling of strong affection between the woman and her primary support person. One woman described loving as "a strong bond," while other women described it as caring. A primary support person was described as someone who "doesn't have any interest except for loving me."

The last important quality of the primary support relationship is understanding. The support person knows the meaning of the situation for the woman because of an implicitness or reciprocal, interpersonal knowing which has developed between them. Understanding evolves from a long-term relationship and/or a common experience. The women believed understanding was important in their relationships with their primary support people because it meant a holistic analysis of the situation. The support person knew the woman's history, her goals, her responses, what she needed, etc. and provided support from that perspective. The woman did not have to explain everything to the support person. "We sense each other's problems before it is even articulated. We each have a sixth sense about each other." The long-term relationship had allowed a history of shared experiences to develop over the years.

The same quality in a relationship can be engendered by sharing a common experience. For example, a primary support person may have experienced a divorce or may be a role model for a career the woman aspires to. The common experience provides an insider's perspective of the situation and is believed to be the impetus for certain types of support. The following two examples of support are based on common experiences—divorce and career: "He is going through the same single parenting situation so there's an understanding and a lot of communication about our situations." "My boss had many of my same experiences at my age. She is extremely supportive of my endeavors, has a tremendous willingness for me to succeed, and allows me to explore many avenues in the business."

TABLE 3 Direct Support

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Category</i>	<i>Substance Data</i>
1. Creating an environment	a. protecting	Taken care of. She mothers me. She took me in when my husband attacked me and protected me
	a. nurturing	She is my back-up person for all kinds of support. I couldn't be going to school without her Extremely supportive of my endeavors. Allows me to explore many avenues in the business
	b. listening	A sounding board I can say anything. He really listens
2. Providing a perspective	a. anchoring	She has given my daughter a sense of family that I haven't been able to provide her
	b. distancing	Giving me an objective point of view She's not involved in the situation so she can be more objective, tell me the truth
3. Giving direct assistance	a. instrumental aid	Helps financially Watches my daughter when I go to work or socialize

### Direct Support

The direct support given to the single mothers in this study is characterized by three themes: creating an environment (protecting, nurturing, and listening), providing a perspective (anchoring and distancing), and giving direct assistance (instrumental aid) (see Table 3). The latter category, giving direct assistance, is the pragmatic aid given to women on a daily or intermittent basis to help her with the daily management of her life. Included in this category are child care, transportation, financial support, advice, and assistance during emergencies. Direct assistance was the only type of support related significantly to a demographic variable. Women with younger children ( $\bar{x} = 6.3$ ) reported receiving more direct assistance than women with

older children ( $\bar{x} = 10$ );  $t(70) = 2.88, p = .005$ . The separate variances  $t$  test was used since the assumption for equal variances was rejected.

The theme of creating an environment characterizes three types of support that are based on caring. Protecting is a shielding from harm. Women who are protected feel "taken care of." The support person intercepts potential harm to the woman, whether it be emotional, financial, physical, etc., and tries to provide a safe environment for her survival. For one woman, protecting occurred when her female friend took her home (to the friend's house) after the woman's husband attacked her. Another woman described emotional protection when she said her male friend was "always around to help out when I am depressed." Protecting is taking care of a woman's immediate needs because of an impending threat to her safety.

Nurturing is also a form of caring. However, the purpose of nurturing is to facilitate the woman's personal growth. Nurturant support provides an environment that allows a woman to take on new challenges, try out new behaviors, face possible threats to her self-integrity, etc. The support person provides only the support which allows the woman the freedom to meet the challenge. These challenges are individually determined and include living alone with her children, returning to school, beginning a new job, managing the family's finances, etc. The following excerpt from one interview describes nurturing: "She (my mother) is my back-up person for all kinds of support—emotional, financial, child care, etc. I couldn't be going to school without her."

A critical element of a caring environment is the woman's perception that the support person is willing to listen. Listening is hearing thoughtfully. Each woman who described listening as a type of support believed that the support person was attentive and receptive to her needs. The support person listened because the woman was valued, loved, trusted, etc. Common phrases involving listening were: "He's a good listener," "a sounding board," "I can say anything," and "really listens."

Listening is often used to provide another perspective. Anchoring and distancing are elements of the third supportive theme, providing a perspective. At times the women felt that they were too submerged in their situations to look at them objectively. They therefore looked to someone who was not enmeshed to give them an outside opinion.

Anchoring and distancing, however, provide different perspectives. Distancing provides an outsider's evaluation of the woman's situation or "gives me an objective point of view." Anchoring is the reinforcement of fundamental beliefs rather than an outside perspective of a woman's situation. Women perceived anchoring when they were reminded of important beliefs—reli-

gious, ethical, etc.—that shaped their lives. The transition of divorce can erode many fundamental beliefs, and the support person who anchors serves as a reminder that some beliefs should not be altered regardless of situational events. One woman's sister was able to reinforce the importance of family: "She has given my daughter a sense of family that I haven't been able to provide her."

## DISCUSSION

Concern exists that most divorced women lose contact with friends and are left with only relatives to support them after the separation (Milardo, 1987; Saunders, 1983). However, the findings from this study indicate that while younger women often identify a relative as their primary support person, older women generally select their primary support person from one of the other three categories: ex-spouse/lover, friend/work associate/neighbor, and professionals. The types of support provided by the primary support people are congruent with the previous studies of the total network by Weiss (1976b) and Gottlieb (1978, 1985). Availability, continuity, mutuality, and understanding confirm Gottlieb's (1985) hallmarks of the informal network. However, this study was not able to assess how much of these qualities of the support network were accounted for by the primary support person. The role of the primary person should be compared to that of each other network member and the total network in future studies.

The qualities of the primary support relationship most frequently mentioned by the participants in this study were continuity, availability, and understanding. These qualities allow a relationship to transcend the changes, i.e., from marriage to separation to divorce, in the woman's life. Weiss (1976a) described the need of single mothers for a sustaining community, and these qualities meet that need.

A relationship between the ages of the woman's children and the provision of direct assistance was found. Women with younger children received more direct assistance; often this assistance was in the form of child care. No other relationships were found between the types of support and demographic data.

It will be important for future studies to relate the presence of the underlying qualities and direct support from the primary support person to the well-being of single mothers as they experience the transition from marriage through divorce. Suggested outcomes are goal achievement (Duffy, 1984), mental well-being (Isaacs & Leon, 1986), and physical health.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>This study was funded by the National Center for Nursing Research, Grant NIH NR01454-03.

<sup>2</sup>The author wishes to acknowledge the contributions of Noel Robinson and Lee Smith to the qualitative analysis of the data.

## REFERENCES

- Brown, G. W., Bhrolchain, M. N., & Harris, T. (1975). Social class and psychiatric disturbance among women in an urban population. *Sociology, 9*, 225-254.
- Dillman, D. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method*. New York: Wiley.
- Dimond, M., & Jones S. L. (1983). Social support: A review and theoretical integration. In P. L. Chin (Ed.), *Advances in nursing theory development* (pp. 235-249). Rockville, MD: Aspen.
- Duffy, M. E. (1984). Transcending options: Creating a milieu for practicing high level wellness. *Health Care for Women International, 5*, 145-161.
- Eckenrode, J., Kochanevich-Wallace, P., & Miller, M. (1986, November). *Social support and psychological well-being: Married versus single mothers*. Paper presented at the 1986 Annual Conference of the National Council on Family Relations, Dearborn, MI.
- Gottlieb, B. H. (1978). The development and classification scheme of informal helping behaviors. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 10*, 105-115.
- Gottlieb, B. H. (1985). Assessing and strengthening the impact of social support on mental health. *Social Work, 30*, 293-300.
- Hall, L. A., Schaefer, E. S., & Greenberg, R. S. (1987). Quality and quantity of social support as correlates of psychosomatic symptoms in mothers with young children. *Research in Nursing and Health, 10*, 289-298.
- Isaacs, M. B., & Leon, G. H. (1986). Social networks, divorce, and adjustment: A tale of three generations. *Journal of Divorce, 9* (4), 1-16.
- Jacobson, D. E. (1986). Types and timing of social support. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 27*, 250-264.
- McLanahan, S. S., Wedemeyer, N. V., & Adelberg, T. (1981). Network structure, social support, and psychological well-being in the single-parent family. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 43*, 601-612.
- Menaghan, E. G., & Lieberman, M. A. (1986). Changes in depression following divorce: A panel study. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 48*, 319-328.
- Milardo, R. M. (1987). Changes in social networks of women and men following divorce. *Journal of Family Issues, 8*(1), 78-96.
- Miller, P. M., & Ingham, J. G. (1976). Friends, confidants and symptoms. *Social Psychiatry, 11*(2), 51-58.
- Pearlin, L. I., & Johnson, J. S. (1977). Marital status, life-strains and depression. *American Sociological Review, 42*(5), 704-715.
- Polit, D., & Hungler, B. P. (1985). *Essentials of nursing research: Methods and applications*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott.
- Richard, J. (1982). Addressing stress factors in single-parent women headed households. *Women and Therapy, 1*(3), 15-27.

- Saunders, B. E. (1983). The social consequences of divorce: Implications for family policy. *Journal of Divorce, 6*(3), 1-17.
- Stephen, T. D. (1984). Symbolic interdependence and post-break-up distress: A reformulation of the attachment construct. *Journal of Divorce, 8*, 1-16.
- Weiss, R. S. (1976a). The contributions of an organization of single parents to the well-being of its members. In G. Caplan & M. Killilea (Eds.), *Support systems and mutual help* (pp. 177-185). New York: Grune & Stratton.
- Weiss, R. S. (1976b). Transition states and other stressful situations. Their nature and programs for their management. In G. Caplan & M. Killilea (Eds.), *Support systems and mutual help* (pp. 213-232). New York: Grune & Stratton.
- White, S. W., & Mika, K. (1983). Family divorce and separation: Theory and research. In H. I. McCubbin, M. B. Sussman, & J. M. Patterson (Eds.), *Social stress and the family* (pp. 175-192). New York: The Haworth Press.

## Commentaries

Although family research has, since the 1940s research of Hill, explored family coping patterns during times of family change, research specific to the coping patterns of divorced mothers is in a relatively early stage of development. Therefore, basic descriptive research is needed in this important area, and Duffy's research fits into this category. One would hope that the descriptive phase of this type of research will advance more quickly than other family research has, for health care workers need to know a good deal in terms of coping patterns of divorced mothers. How nurses can support the mental health of these women, or at least not act as an additional stressor in health care situations, is important disciplinary knowledge. Additionally, since nurses are often women, the ways in which women may more effectively support other women in health care situations needs to be addressed.

The study by Duffy, although not addressing all of these points, to some extent will lay the groundwork for such explorations. The findings, although not surprising, lead to further, more specific, explorations. For example, although the underlying qualities of the primary support were found to be, predictably, continuity, availability, mutuality, trusting, etc., the ways in which nurses can either offer or enhance this type of support is an appropriate question for future research. One difficulty with family research in the past was the abstract level of theory produced and the lack of practice relevance. The key to making a major contribution to the overall field, I believe, is to go beyond descriptive research to prescriptions for health care situations. Duffy's program of research has this potential.

There are several characteristics of this study that might not be acceptable at a later stage of research but that probably do not compromise this beginning exploratory work. For example, the 51% participation rate is low. In addition, the relationship of support characteristics to age of the children/women could have been more fully explored, as could have the needs of the women by income level. Nevertheless, as a beginning effort the research sheds light upon the characteristics of the support that

these women found most helpful and lays the groundwork for a more controlled study. Finally, although the content analysis was described, the possible uses of computer programs to assist with this effort would be interesting to readers. This was not, however, a necessary focus of this research.

*Ann L. Whall, Ph.D., F.A.A.N.  
Professor and Director  
Center for the Development of  
Gerontological Nursing  
School of Nursing  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor*

The investigator addresses the following questions:

- (1) Whom do recently divorced mothers identify as their primary support person?
- (2) What types of support are provided by the primary support people of recently divorced mothers?

This investigator makes three important contributions to our understanding of the support received by recently divorced mothers. First, she describes divorced women's experiences. Second, she characterizes the sources of support available to divorced women. And third, she creates a taxonomy of dimensions of support that are grounded in women's own experiences. This commentary will focus on the dimensions of support and their significance for further research.

To date, several nursing investigators have characterized types of social support available to people during times of duress. Categories of support such as affect, affirmation, and aid have guided development of instruments to measure social support. In turn, these measures have been applied to groups of people in widely divergent health states and life contexts. Most investigators have focused their attention on the direct effects of support on the individuals' well-being or on the stress-buffering effects of support. Recently investigators such as Norbeck (1988) have called for increased attention to how social support affects health for specific populations. Duffy's study makes an important contribution to that effort.

The underlying qualities of support—continuity, availability, mutuality, trusting, valuing, loving, and understanding—illustrate the dimensions likely to be important in influencing who is best equipped to provide support and may suggest in what ways certain individuals may be helpful. These characteristics, found in members of one's natural helping networks, cannot all be found in professional caregivers. Nonetheless, some of the characteristics can be learned by natural helpers and professionals, thus having implications for the training of both lay and professional helpers.

The types of direct support enumerated by the women in this study,—creating an environment (protecting, nurturing, listening), providing perspective (anchoring,



distancing), and giving direct assistance,—suggest ways in which natural helping networks bolster women in transition from coupled to uncoupled life-styles. These types of support can be included in clinical protocols designed to promote the well-being of women who are divorcing. Testing the differential effects of these varieties of support on health and illness and assessing the timing of their effectiveness could enhance our understanding of services for this population as well as serve as a model for assessing support sources for others.

*Nancy Fugate Woods, Ph.D., R.N., F.A.A.N.*  
*Professor*  
*Department of Parent and Child Nursing*  
*School of Nursing*  
*University of Washington*  
*Seattle*

## REFERENCE

Norbeck, J. (1988). *Social support annual review of nursing research* (Vol. 6). New York: Springer.

## Response by the Author

I would like to thank Drs. Whall and Woods for their thoughtful comments on this paper and concur with their conclusions. The social support literature is lacking in specificity. If members of practice professions such as nursing are to offer social support that enhances well-being, knowledge is needed about the types of support perceived helpful by particular populations and the relationships between those types of support and health outcomes.

This article presents descriptive work on the types of support received from a particular network member, the primary support person. It is important to note that these data were collected during the first 3 months after divorce. Longitudinal studies that track changes in types of support over the period of adjustment to divorce are needed.

There are two additional uses of this information that are often forgotten. First, in a related study (Duffy & Smith, in press), providers of support described the types of support they believe they give to recently divorced women with children. One of the processes of providing support is deliberating: the conscious, calculated decision by a support person about the types and amounts of support required by a woman for growth and development. Informal network members could benefit from knowledge about social support that relates the types of support with health outcomes. The second

beneficiary of this information is the women themselves. Historically, women have not learned to seek support that is helpful to them. Instead, their support network, often composed of family members, is determined by convenience rather than design. Knowledge about types of support that are related to greater well-being can be used by the women to seek the support they need.

*Mary E. Duffy, R. N., Ph.D.*

*Assistant Professor*

*Department of Mental Health, Community, and Administrative Nursing*

*School of Nursing*

*University of California*

*San Francisco*

#### REFERENCE

Duffy, M. E., & Smith, L. (in press). The process of providing support to recently divorced single mothers. *Health Care For Women International*.