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# THE PUNISHMENT OF DIVORCED MOTHERS

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## Introduction

As the clinical social worker to seven young divorced mothers I began to wonder why the lives of these women had become so remarkably unbearable. I compared the experiences of the women who were coming to me for group psychotherapy with about thirty similar divorced mothers who were also members of the West Side Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles. All the women were experiencing similar difficulties. I also explored some of the literature about the problems faced by divorced mothers<sup>1</sup>. This essay is the culmination of my research. It summarizes some of my conjectures about the disadvantaged social status of the divorced mothers of the West Side Jewish Community Center.<sup>2</sup>

Punishment is a strong word and yet I believe it is the application of punishment that explains the disadvantaged social position of the divorced mothers.

I intend to use both a dictionary and a behaviorist definition of punishment in my analysis. Webster<sup>3</sup> gives the following definition of punish:

- a): to impose a penalty on a fault, offense, violation.
- b): to inflict a penalty for the commission of (an offense) in retribution or retaliation.

The behaviorists<sup>4</sup> define punishment as either the presentation of an aversive stimulus, or the withholding of a potential reward, following a response.

In the balance of the paper I analyze why divorce becomes the onerous behavioral response, the offense committed by our thirty-seven divorced mothers, and how their divorced status elicits the specific punishments listed below. It is important to note that the punishments imposed upon the divorced mothers exemplify either the presentation of aversive stimuli, or the withholding of potential rewards. These punishments are inflicted by individuals

independently, and by individuals as the representatives of social institutions. More specifically, these punishments of the divorced mother take the form either of the paucity of adequate resources and services for her, or placing barriers in the way of her meeting many of her basic needs. It is hypothesized that the punishments are inflicted both consciously and unconsciously. The following are some of the specific punishments that I believe are experienced by the divorced mothers; these are intertwined in this essay's cause and effect analysis:

second class social status; social ostracism; becoming tabu; victimization by vendors of goods and services; depersonalization into a sexual object; recruitment into prostitution; pressures to relinquish children resulting in a loss of maternal self esteem; denial of, or strings attached to, meeting dependency needs; denial of economic subsidies; denial of basic services, social and recreational, day care, homemaker, counseling.

I believe that the divorced mothers become recipients of these punishments on an interpersonal level because they threaten many person's intrapsychic equilibrium around such issues as sexual roles, role of the nuclear family, and investments in monogamous marriage. I also believe that, even though many divorced mothers become the breadwinners of their family, as a group they tend to be lesser consumers of goods and services;<sup>5</sup> again in payment for this fault representatives of some, if not all, economic and social institutions, flagellate the divorced mothers.

I hope that my analysis and its conclusions will provide hypotheses about the punishment of divorced mothers that can be tested by researchers. The absence of knowledge about divorced persons is a paradox in view of the current enormity of the problems. The Los Angeles Times<sup>6</sup> reports that 16 million Americans are or have been divorced; 800,000 couples were divorced between January 1973 and August 1973. The newspaper goes on to report that one out of three marriages today will end in divorce. With so many of them in our midst it is almost shameful that society as a whole is largely ignorant about divorced persons; even therapists, usually married themselves, says Krantzler<sup>7</sup> as quoted in the Los Angeles Times, have only an intellectual understanding of the utter desolation and paranoia that besets virtually all divorced people. Therefore, one of my primary reasons for writing this paper is to provoke research about the plight of the general population of divorced mothers.

Another important reason for writing this paper is to offer specific suggested programs and specific interventive strategies for social workers who plan to work with divorced mothers. The final section of this paper recommends such programs and interventive strategies.

### Study Sample

At the outset let me delineate my study sample. The thirty-seven divorced mothers I have chosen to study are white lower middle, and middle class women between the ages of twenty-five and forty. Thirty of the thirty-seven mothers are Jewish. Perhaps these women may have different experiences than divorced women of other ages of their own class. Perhaps their experiences may also differ from those of divorced women of other ethnic groups and other classes. Their experiences differ from the widowed, who have no choice about their being single.<sup>8</sup> All the women I am writing about feel some guilt about the failure of their marriages because they belong to a generation socialized into a religious "till death do us part", view of the marriage bond. The fact that social provision for widowed mothers through the federally sponsored Social Security Act exceeds that for divorced mothers provided by local welfare agencies<sup>9</sup> may be society's way of excusing widows for their state while holding divorcess culpable for theirs.

To repeat, the women studied were also known to me either as my therapy clients or as members of the West Side Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles.

This study then is based upon a sample of divorced mothers who have sought out either social services, or therapeutic assistance, or both, for their problems.

Now that I've delineated my study sample as white, predominantly Jewish, middle class divorced mothers between the ages of twenty-five and forty, let me describe their problems.

### Problems

#### The Fifth Wheel Syndrome

Commercial enterprises, churches, and schools sponsor many

events for unmarried teen-agers and young adults to encourage courtship and marriage. Contrast the services provided for teen-agers and young adults with "\$3-pay at the door-singles parties in tacky restaurants"<sup>10</sup> provided for the single and the divorced. The paucity of socializing opportunities for divorced mothers, the fact that most adult activities in our society are couple oriented forces divorced mothers into dependence upon their married friends. Unattached men are scarce in her twenty-five to forty year old age range and the matchmaking of her friends may be one of the divorced mothers few means of meeting one. An awkward situation can be produced when the match may be mismade because of incompatible sexual, social, intellectual or other interests. The divorced mother also seeks the companionship of intact families because in this fashion, at least for a time, her children are part of a family again.

In a world designed for couples the "fifth wheel" often sits like a mother-in-law in the back seat of the car of one of her sets of coupled friends, as she is delivered to a party. Punishment in this case takes the form of the subtle second class assignation of the back seat occupant, which she may feel either through her being subtly ostracized from the conversation or her sensing a condescending tone about her participation in it.

Even though the divorced mother may be willing to subject herself to being the "fifth wheel," even though her coupled friends tend to split into groups of all men and all women at their parties and social gatherings, there is a reluctance to invite the divorced mother because in general divorced women are viewed as seductresses.

Before we discuss the problems of the divorced mother being perceived as a seductress, let us leave the topic of the "fifth wheel" syndrome by looking at one of the ultimate ironies of our couple oriented society as described in Gail Parent's best seller, "Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York."<sup>11</sup> As part of her suicide plot designed as a means of seducing her boyfriend into marriage, Sheila, the perennial "fifth wheel" wishes to cause minimal hardship for her surviving loved ones and so attempts to buy her own final resting place. The cemetery owner informs Sheila that plots are sold to couples only; she must purchase two plots in order to be buried in one.

#### The Seductress

Since many marriages are unstable the divorced mother can be

perceived as a threat to both her male and female married friends. Her divorce may be viewed as permission for her friends to take the same step. Behavioral patterns such as hysteria, suicide, and divorce have a tendency to become contagious.<sup>12</sup> For many women of the generation to which the divorced mothers of this study were socialized, divorce remains pejorative because of the religious sanctions which were once imposed against it. At present, however, secular approach afford many examples of divorce, and thus makes divorce more permissible. The divorcee nonetheless becomes feared as a symbol of the potentiality of the dissolution of one's own marriage.

Many of her women friends are afraid that the divorced mother will seduce their husbands. An example of this was told to me by a colleague. After a woman neighbor became divorced, the men on her block found themselves accompanied by their wives when they departed for work. A corollary to this story was told to me by a divorced mother. She reported that after her divorce many of her friends' husbands dropped in for coffee. For reasons which will be discussed shortly it seems that the unprotected status of the divorced mother may tend to loosen a man's inhibition against the possibility of the divorced mother becoming his sexual partner.

At times the divorced mother herself, and the men with whom she comes in contact regress into adolescent sexual patterns. Because of her failure in marriage, the divorced mother often feels an exaggerated need to prove her sexual attractiveness and gives off more numerous seductive signals. Adolescent oriented men see her as an easy mark. After all, the divorced mother has already been a sexually active woman, probably desires sexual intercourse, and in his grandiosity, the adolescent man sees himself as the generous provider of the divorced mother's sexual needs.

Punishment of the divorced mother perceived as a seductress often takes the form of a kind of abuse practiced by adolescents. One divorced mother hungry for male companionship went on a blind date with a man recommended by her friend. Later that day she called me telling me hysterically that she's never been subjected to such humiliation. The man had driven her to Sausalito, twenty miles from her home, and then proclaimed either she go to bed with him or he would leave her stranded. Evidently her friend had misjudged the man she recommended and I had to meet my divorced friend and take her home.

The divorced mothers in my therapy group have all informed me that in Los Angeles all too many men no longer ask to take a woman out for a date. The man invites himself to the divorced mother's home for coffee and sexual intercourse and not necessarily in that order. In the movie "Blume in Love", Blume loses his potency after his divorce. His psychiatrist suggests ever so subtly that Blume may wish to try "sports fucking" to regain his virility. Both divorced men and divorced women may regress and experiment with this adolescent proving of one's sexual potency with its commensurate potential denigration of self esteem for being part of an object relationship rather than entering into an interpersonal human relationship. Becoming depersonalized into a sexual object therefore may be another form of punishment to which the divorced mother is subjected.

Another form of punishment which the sexually active divorced mother encounters is the physical punishment of her body because of the increased possibility of her contracting venereal disease. Each of the five mothers in my therapy group had a bout with some form of venereal disease. These more or less bourgeois middle class women suddenly find themselves on a clinic line suffering all the humiliation of their poorer sisters after they discover they have trichomoniasis, gonorrhea, or syphilis. One mother reported that she attempted to inform her sexual partner that he may have gonorrhea. His response to her was, "You fucking cunt, you're trying to shake me down".

#### At the Mercy of Materialism

The divorced mother receives no dispensation for living on about one half her former income. Even before her debts mount and her financial fluidity diminishes, perhaps in anticipation of this event, the divorced mother discovers that she must relinquish all her credit cards; her divorce has earned her a credit rating of zero. At a time when finances become most pressing many divorced mothers cannot turn to parents or relatives because of the dependency strings which would in all probability be attached to a loan or a gift of money. Some divorced mothers feel that asking for money means more degradation than facing financial disaster. Yet, with lessened income, the house or apartment usually needs repairs, the automobile breaks down, and medical and dental problems arise--the bills arrive relentlessly. One attractive divorced mother reported that when she told her daughter's orthodontist that she would now have difficulty paying his bill he suggested that she seduce one of her sugar daddies to pay the bill. While this mother didn't succumb to this suggestion

of prostituting herself, other divorced mothers do. Making her vulnerable to recruitment into prostitution is but another form of the punishment of the divorced mother.

Whereas in many cases a former husband can be, and is, a buffer, all too many divorced women are subjected to the ruthless exploitation of many vendors of good and services.

Although the recent phenomena of mothers rather than fathers giving up their children in divorce may be related to the liberation of women, many women give up their children because the family retains a greater financial capacity to provide for the children. This reason is offered in addition to the more obvious possibility that the father may be the better parent. One mother who placed her teenage daughter in a foster home resented her daughter's weekend visits cause she didn't have the money to provide for her daughter's board and care. This particular mother screamed out to her therapy group peers, "If I'm ever to be reincarnated God, please don't bring me back as a mother." Subsequent therapy revealed that she had buried many of her maternal feelings. Although there were other problems involved, this particular women with a past history of deprivation chose to spend what little money she possessed on herself rather than to spend it on her daughter and then resent her.

The financial pressure which forces many divorced mothers to part with their children and suffer a loss in their maternal self-esteem is offered as another example of the punishment of divorced mothers.

Before moving to the explanatory underpinnings of all of these problems faced by divorced mothers, many of the previous remarks compel me to say a few words about the women's liberation movement.

Many members of the women's movement speak about the increased number of social policies designed to protect divorced mothers and they speak about the ever increasing capacity of divorced mothers to protect themselves. Although, in my estimation, these points are correct, it is dangerous to allow value wishes to be perceived as reality. Some members of the women's movement behave as if the goals and objectives of the movement have been achieved to a greater degree than current facts support. I regret to say that the problems I am reporting probably reflect not only the day to day realities of the mothers I am writing about but also probably reflect the day to day realities of divorced mothers generally. The paragraphs to follow attempt to explain from a broad social-psychological perspective,



the impact of at least five thousand years of history upon the present problems faced by most divorced mothers. To me it is ahistorical to believe that the current struggles for the equality of women will be achieved in the immediate foreseeable future merely because of the recent revival of this crusade. I ask persons concerned about the women's movement to please perceive this paper as a potentially plausible description of what is so as to be better prepared to bring into being what ought to be.

### Psycho-Social Causes of Punishment

#### Intra-Psychic Problems of the Divorced Mothers

Although this paper emphasizes the infliction of punishment upon the divorced mothers, it is important to be aware of the intra-psychic difficulties many of them seem to share. Their intra-psychic problems probably predispose them to becoming the targets for punishment. The psychological problems they have can also be found among many of their unmarried and widowed sisters. It is my belief that because she has failed in her marriage the divorced mother is inordinately oppressed for having her particular set of psychological difficulties. The intra-psychic problems to be enumerated are primarily those of my therapy clients. My readings about divorced mothers in general, my contact with divorced mothers at the West Side Jewish Community Center, seem to confirm that many of the intra-psychic problems of divorced mothers in therapy are shared by divorced mothers in general. The generalizations I will state in the paragraphs which follow, however, apply only to the sample of thirty-seven divorced mothers who were members of the West Side Jewish Community Center.

Many of the divorced mothers had some difficulty in accepting their femininity. One very attractive young woman for example stated that her father would have preferred her to have been born a boy. His sons are not as bright as she is and he wished she could have been his successor as the owner of his business. It is my clinical impression that one of her underlying conflicts is being a woman yet wishing she could be more masculine and business like. Other divorced mothers also had underlying conflicts because their fathers had openly expressed preferences for sons rather than daughters.

Many divorced mothers revealed that they had negative feelings about their bodies. For some their sisters were preferred as prettier. One attractive mother whose occupation was actress and model flagellated herself at times because she was not as busty or bustier than many of

the women whom she viewed as competitors.

Another intra-psychic common denominator for many of the women in my therapy group was the paucity of significant involvement with parents. Some of the women had spent many years of their youth in foster homes and orphanages; others had to cope with non-giving step parents or non-giving biological parents. One woman described her parents as constantly battling. Many times the police stopped her parents from continuing their knife or frying pan wielding attacks upon each other. This particular woman is still trying to erase the psychic shame of being known to her neighbors, relatives, and friends as the daughter of the couple that staged the neighborhoods most spectacular marital battles.

A problem shared by those who had particular problems with their fathers was a tendency to seek older men as lovers and husbands. One woman was quite explicit about her sexual attraction to her narcissistic rejecting father. She expressed her thoughts about her conscious preferences for older men by saying, "If this is oedipal I feel good about it so why should I change it." This pattern did change during therapy, however, and she is currently dating men closer to her own age range.

Because of the problems enumerated, many of the women selected their first husbands either for the purpose of resolving problems of identity or to bolster their low self esteem, or to satisfy their hunger for a father. Others married the first reasonably acceptable man on the scene for the purpose of escaping from their abhorrent families. The husbands selected were wanting as exemplars of either psychic strength, or psychic health, or both, and the probability of divorce was exceedingly high at the outset of the marriages.

#### Generalized Fears Aroused in Others

The exaggerated tabu like avoidance of the divorced mother by many of her married friends suggests that her person symbolizes some deep threat to their psychic equilibrium. The analysis of the fear the divorced mother arouses in others will be developed from the perspective of the incorporation of sociological phenomenon into intra-psychic entities.

It is necessary to review our anthropological knowledge about the origin of monogamous marriage in order to understand the social threat a divorced mother may pose for both married men and for married women. According to the classic study of the family by

Bachofen,<sup>13</sup> monogamous marriage came into being in the period between savagery and barbarism. Bachofen stresses that one of the most significant revolutions in history was the transition from mother right to father right. In exchange for her deliverance from group marriage and from its concomitant oppression, caused by a denser population which increased her responsibilities, and in exchange for her deliverance from being available as a sexual partner to the community of men who did not belong to her gens, women invented monogamous marriage.

Bachofen and Engels<sup>14</sup> both stress that in a most unfair exchange women bound themselves to monogamous marriage while men did not. Men institutionalized prostitution and the double standard to preserve their sexual prerogatives of the era of group marriage. Simultaneously, in the rudimentary capitalism of barbarism, all accumulated material property was owned by males because of father right. As Briffault<sup>15</sup> states it, the only economic asset women retained in the transition from mother right to father right was sex. Thus by giving up most of her economic assets, the bases for social power under capitalism, women chose powerlessness in exchange for monogamy. Furthermore, Davis<sup>16</sup> writes that in western capitalistic society the sexual intimacy of a man's wife also becomes his economic property. The powerlessness of women is thus doubly concretized in monogamy: sexual intimacy one of women's few remaining sources of economic and social power, and their material economic assets all become their husbands' property. In this exchange the husband protects his wife from other males who may seek her out as a sex partner. The husband thus symbolically and actually protects his wife from again becoming a member of the community of women available to those men who have not in reality given up the right of group marriage.

It has been conjectured that the male's protective role in this exchange has a biological base. Horney<sup>17</sup> for example suggests that females of all animal species seem to be less needy sexually than males and the males therefore develop various physical and social devices for keeping females available as sexual partners. It is possible that some of the recent essays that equate male and female sexual proclivities describe behaviors which in essence are alien to the natural instincts, of the sexes. Psychology has taught us that culture can counteract instinct, but at the price of the weakening of the instinct. To support this argument I offer the following information. Male baboons have an apparent biological predisposition to protect all female baboons and children from attacks.<sup>18</sup> Despite

full cognizance of the danger of translating animal behavior into human behavior, from a biological perspective, it appears that for purposes of sexual intimacy and the continuity of family life, females may be biologically programmed to be protected while males may be biologically programmed to be their protectors.

In his "Totem and Tabu" Freud<sup>19</sup> ingeniously re-acquaints us with the notion that an individual's neurotic behavior can be conceptualized as regression by him to the more primitive tabus of an earlier stage of development of his particular society. For this paper this principle can be generalized to state that in current society monogamy co-exists with more primitive marital forms. I hypothesize that the divorced mother may symbolize for both sexes a potential regression to the group marriage of barbarism. The logical question that arises, if this conjecture is valid, is why the divorced mother's regression to the status of group marriage poses such a deep intra-psychic threat to married persons of both sexes?

#### Specific Intrapsychic Fears Aroused in Married Women

Many married women fear their female divorced peers<sup>20</sup> because they symbolize their own potential return to the onerousness and degradation of group marriage. One of my clients, for example, is ensconced in a tortuous marriage. She fears divorce because she doesn't want to be like her divorced neighbor whom she feels chooses to date many men to satisfy both her sexual needs and her needs to avoid loneliness. Many married women friends of the divorced mothers also fear them as potential seducers of their husbands. Again, I remind the reader about the married women who accompanied their husbands to their cars when they departed for work because one of their female friends on the block and recently become divorced. It is almost commonplace knowledge that many divorced women become increasingly seductive in order to obtain renewed confirmation of their sexual and personal attractiveness. In reporting about the behavior of women in the age range of the population I am studying, the twenty five to forty age range, Gebhard<sup>21</sup> states that divorced women exceed widowed women in the frequency of both intercourse and orgasm. It is because the divorced woman is more likely to have had an unsatisfactory marriage during the last years of her marriage, says Gebhard,<sup>22</sup> that she is more likely to have experienced extra-marital coitus. Gebhard<sup>23</sup> goes on to say, "In this sense the divorced had a 'head start' on the widows who had no ready made sexual partners." In this age group, reports Gebhard,<sup>24</sup> divorced women in contrast to widowed women are more likely to seek solace in purely sexual relation-

ships. Especially when the divorced mother's marital problem was sexual, either because her sexual appetite was greater than her husband's, or he was impotent, or both, she can find a friend or friends ready to serve her ungratified sexual needs.<sup>25</sup> The male case workers of Jewish Big Brothers of Los Angeles<sup>26</sup> report that more seductive signals are emitted from divorced women and divorced mothers than from widowed, married, and single women clients. The married woman, therefore, who may be concerned about some of her own sexual shortcomings, and who is aware of the increased seductiveness of many divorced women may fear that her husband is susceptible to being seduced by the recently divorced mother in her neighborhood.

The divorced mother may become a symbol of dependency for her married compatriots again stirring up the dread of regression to this status. For those women whose parents' pattern has been to give their children money or meet their children's dependency needs with strings attached, the prospect of regression to dependency becomes ominous. The anticipated alternative for the married women with this kind of background should they become divorced, and should they refuse parental support would be for them to become welfare recipients, also a dreaded dependency status.

Let us leave this rather brief discussion about the fears the divorced mother may stir up in married women for the moment and move ahead to the fears divorced mothers may stir up in married men.

#### Specific Intra-Psychic Fears Aroused in Married Men

After divorce, a mother no longer enjoys the zealous and jealous protection of a man. In a sense she is in a weakened almost defenseless state in relation to male sexual and aggressive impulses. Freud<sup>27</sup> reminds us that we have the impulse to direct our sexual and aggressive drives against less powerful persons in the community. Society codifies behaviors designed to protect the weak, the dying, the sick, children, women in general, divorced and widowed women in particular. The divorced mother stirs up the primitive sexual and aggressive drives of some married men placing the men in an anxious state because of the conflict engendered between their impulses and their consciences.<sup>28</sup> As a corollary to this point the discomfort such a conflict produces for these men may provoke them to further degrade the defenseless divorced mothers in vengeance. Reik<sup>29</sup> explains this phenomenon when he says that we can hate someone because he or she is seen as the cause of loosening some of our more primitive impulses.

Now that we're moving closer to a discussion of the primitive threats the divorced mother may symbolize for men, it can serve as a lead into a subject deserving special attention, namely, the more deeply unconscious, more deeply significant intra-psychic threat the divorced mother may symbolize for both men and women. I refer to the notion that the divorced mother may be unconsciously perceived as either a castrator, a destroyer of life, or both. This is the subject of our next paragraphs.

### Fear of Women as Castrators and Destroyers

Even if the fault is not hers, simply because her marriage has failed, many men view the divorced mother either as a female who fails to bolster male adequacy, or as a female who is a psychological castrator of males, or both. For persons of both sexes this fear of women as castrators has deep psychological roots says Horney.<sup>30</sup> She speculates that because women give life, psychologically, they can also be perceived as capable of taking it away. A discussion with one of my female students has led me to believe that the gravity of this responsibility may have been one of the unconscious causal factors of the shift from mother right to father right. I happened to have mentioned Horney's statement to my student and her spontaneous concerned comment was, "What an awesome responsibility." "I don't want to be responsible for that." The shift to father right may have been an unconscious choice women made to share this responsibility with men. It may have been women's means of attempting to ward off unconscious aggression by men toward women because of their supposed power over life and death.

The divorced mother may also be perceived as the destroyer of a relationship with her husband. She may be perceived as the destroyer of her family. She may reinforce fear of her by both men and women as a destroyer. The divorced mother probably wishes to ward off any connection with these capacities for the purpose of resecuring the safety of her projected position in relation to men.

Let us now broaden this intra-psychic analysis into a macro-system analysis in order to understand why the divorced mother is subjected to many degrading and humiliating experiences in her encounters with many societal institutions.

### Social Sanctions

In a most provocative article Greenfield<sup>31</sup> asks why materialistic

American society places such exaggerated importance upon romantic love. Romantic love is almost a national psychosis says Greenfield. Romantic love is the exception to the rule, the psychosis we allow, according to Greenfield, in order to produce consuming units known as families.

Evidence has already been cited<sup>32</sup> which suggests that the middle class divorced mother becomes a lesser consumer of economic goods and services. The Los Angeles Times<sup>33</sup> cites examples of middle class couples who refrain from becoming divorced because they foresee that they cannot financially manage the cost of maintaining two households, alimony, and child support. The Times<sup>34</sup> article also highlights the fact that the woman's liberation movement has influenced some judges to render decisions which lessen a husband's financial obligations to his family. The Times cites one case where the husband's earning were thirty five thousand dollars a year and where the judge ruled that the wife and children should be supported for only three months, because the wife was capable supporting herself and the child. In addition to the "liberation" aspect of this type of ruling another rationale for this kind of decision is that judges wish to make financial support of ex-spouses and children comfortable enough to avoid the father's desertion. When the latter occurs it forces families onto the welfare rolls. Whether she receives some support from her husband or becomes a welfare recipient, the divorced mother and her now single parent family consume less economic goods and services than when they constituted an intact family.

It is because she is a lesser consumer and is somewhat defenseless in an economy not exclusively yet sufficiently controlled by males that she is sometimes denied credit, cheated, and is generally written off as an economic second class citizen.

Now that I have discussed my causal hypotheses about the humiliation, degradation, and outright ostracism, the punishment subtly and sometimes not so subtly inflicted upon divorced mothers, what interventive strategies are implied for social workers who attempt to help these women?

### Interventive Strategies

#### Intra-Psychic Level

After divorce, women usually experience fragmentation of their

relationships to their significant others. In all too many cases parents are not sources of help or comfort because of potential dependency entanglements. As discussed earlier many friends are too threatened themselves to offer themselves to either support or even to listen to the problems of their divorced friend. The divorce, the withdrawal of significant others, the descent into a somewhat lower class position, all these losses become devastating blows to the woman's self esteem. These losses place the women into the paradoxical position of being at her lowest ebb having the need to grieve about her losses, with no one to talk to about them. As Fosburgh<sup>35</sup> quotes Krantzler in the Los Angeles Times:

There are no services for the divorced, no courses on how to start a new life, no counselors to help you adjust to being single.

As mundane as obvious and as common sensical as it may sound, one of our first provisions for divorced mothers on an intra-psychic level should be the availability of psychotherapy for little or no cost. The West Side Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles, for example, supplemented the fee of a licensed clinical social worker to provide assistance to the greater than expected number of recently divorced mothers the Center discovered it was serving.

#### Provision of Societal Protection

Thus far we have been talking about how divorce places middle class women into a lower economic status. As part of a discussion about social provision for divorced mothers, it will be helpful to keep in mind that most successful social policies are those designed to serve persons of all social classes.

Like her financially handicapped poorer sister the rich divorced mother desperately needs assistance. Although coping with divorce is probably easier for a wealthy divorced mother, paraphrasing Will Rogers' comment about American's going to hell in automobiles, the wealthy divorced mother is probably going to her own form of hell, albeit in a beautiful house and as an owner of Porsche, Mercedes, or Rolls Royce. Even wealthy women who justifiably welcome divorce find themselves suffering many of the same problems experienced by divorced mothers of other social classes. An additional problem for many wealthy women is an inability to obtain the reliable services necessary for managing their business matters and estates. Social provision of services, therefore, must be provided for divorced mothers of all social classes.



The manner in which some of the divorced mothers I studied successfully cope with their problems offer clues for the provision of services to divorced mothers in general. The more successfully adaptive mothers take the initiative and move out to both single and married persons. Intuitively they seem to engage in their own counter-transference to the social world and say, "No, I am not tabu for all the reasons you attribute to me." "I will not be irrationally dependent upon you for financial, emotional and social assistance." "I have enough strength within myself to join you as an independent social equal." One divorced mother hosts frequent Saturday night socials. These serve to keep this woman surrounded by friends. This woman is fortunate enough, however, to receive enough income from her wealthy father, from her husband, and from her employer to be able to pay for her Saturday night parties. With these clues in mind we can attempt to develop policies for social provision for all divorced mothers.

If divorced mothers are being punished by society because they become lesser consumers of goods and services, the provision of help and social services to help re-integrate these women into society becomes crucial. Goode's<sup>36</sup> research documents that most divorcees remarry. In order to assure this event with minimum damage to these women's psyche isn't it wise to give them the financial wherewithal to again rejoin the mainstream of couples as consumers? Provision of social services and money may achieve the same re-integration into society with less pain to divorced mothers than some of our current punitive attempts to achieve a similar result.

It is because many of the abuses she experiences result from her incapacity to wield economic power that the provision of money to divorced mothers is of primary importance. To assure the safety of whatever money she is awarded or does possess, consultation services would help her cope with legal matters, purchases, repairs, and the various other services she may require.

Since the socialization of most women does not include learning how to do their own repairs, it is suggested that an agency be established whose mission would be the provision of repair persons for divorced mothers. This service would be similar to the homemaker services provided for incapacitated mothers.

According to Toffler<sup>37</sup> divorce should lose its perjorative status because it is increasingly becoming a transitional state. As one of my colleagues put it perhaps we should celebrate divorce as a commencement with as much ceremony as we do the commencement of

marriage. In order to give the divorced mother opportunities to remain in contact with, or to re-enter the social mainstream, or both, settlements community centers, commercial enterprises, and any other pertinent organizations should be encouraged to provide facilities where singles and divorced persons can meet and perhaps eventually mate. The "Parents with Partners" idea could be extended and viewed as a core as opposed to a peripheral social service agency program.

The programs suggested are designed to increase the divorced mother's capacity to defend herself against some of the punishments mentioned throughout this paper. In many cases the adequate provision of resources and services may increase the divorced mother's possibility of re-marriage if this be the life style of her choice. In any event social provision should be designed to increase the divorced mother's capacity to re-enter the social mainstream as person first, and as consumer second.

Support of the woman's movement should strengthen the possibility of achieving some of the aforementioned programs. The overriding contribution of the woman's movement, however, maybe the equalization of the responsibility and power of men and women. According to Engels<sup>38</sup> it will be only after women become emancipated from male domination and from male exploitation and truly become equal that monogamy can become a reality.

I conclude this paper about the punishment of divorced mothers by individuals and society by paraphrasing some remarks by Karen Horney:<sup>39</sup>

Stop psychologically burning divorced mothers at the stake. Because each of us is vulnerable, the flames put to divorced mothers may ultimately lick back and consume us as well.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Many articles mentioned in Schlesinger's annotated bibliography about divorced mothers were explored. The specific reference to Schlesinger's book is: Schlesinger, The One Parent Family (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969)

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter the terms "divorced mothers" will refer to the thirty-seven divorced mothers who were members of the West Side Jewish Community Center of Los Angeles, California.

<sup>3</sup>Websters Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary (Springfield, Massachusetts: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1965). p. 693.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, Edwin J. and Goodman, Esther. Social Behavioral Theory and Interpersonal Helping in Social Work. Ann Arbor: Campus Publishers, 1966. p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard reports that women in divorced status are in low income brackets with a median income in 1960 of \$2640. Also see pp. 19-20 of this paper. Bernard, Jesse "No News but New Ideas" Divorce and After, Bohanan, Paul. ed. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971) p. 8.

<sup>6</sup>Fosburgh, Lacey. "Divorce: Survival course by one who's been there," The Los Angeles Times, January 27, 1974.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Gebhard, Paul. "Postmarital Coitus Among Widows and Divorcees" Divorce and After, Bohanan, Paul. ed. (Garden City, New York, Anchor Books, 1971) pp. 89-107.

<sup>9</sup>Zuckerman Jacob T. "Family Disorganization" Encyclopedia of Social Work (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1965) p.308.

<sup>10</sup>Fosburgh. op. cit.

<sup>11</sup>Parent, Gail. Sheila Levine is Dead and Living in New York (New York: Putnam and Co., 1972).

<sup>12</sup>Miller, Arthur A. "Reactions of Friends to Divorce" Divorce and After Bohanan, Paul. ed. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971) pp. 71-72.

<sup>13</sup>F. Engels. The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1954), p. 88.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Horney, Karen. Feminine Psychology, (New York: W. W. Morton and Company, Inc.) p. 183.

<sup>16</sup>Davis, Kingsley. "Jealousy and Sexual Property" Social Forces Vol. 14, March 1936.

- <sup>17</sup>Horney. op. cit. p. 117
- <sup>18</sup>James Anthony. Therese Benedek Parenthood (First Edition)  
Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1970.
- <sup>19</sup>Sigmund Freud. Totem and Tabu (New York: Vintage Books 1946).
- <sup>20</sup>Miller. op. cit. p. 81.
- <sup>21</sup>Gebhard, op. cit. p. 96.
- <sup>22</sup>Ibid
- <sup>23</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>25</sup>Miller. op. cit. p. 82.
- <sup>26</sup>Reported to the author by Professor Bernice Shinoff of the University of Southern California School of Social Work and a field work supervisor at Jewish Big Brothers and by Harry Pannor, Executive Director of Jewish Big Brothers of Los Angeles.
- <sup>27</sup>Freud. op. cit.
- <sup>28</sup>Miller. op. cit., p. 73.
- <sup>29</sup>Theodore Reik. Listening with the Third Ear (New York: Arena Books, 1972).
- <sup>30</sup>Horney. op. cit., p. 117.
- <sup>31</sup>Greenfield, Sidney. "Love and Marriage in Modern America: A functional Analysis," The Sociological Quarterly Vol. 6, No. 4, Autumn, 1965.
- <sup>32</sup>Bernard. op. cit.

<sup>35</sup>Fosburgh. op. cit.

<sup>36</sup>Goode, William J. "Family Disorganization" Robert H. Merton, Robert A. Nisbet, eds. Contemporary Social Problems, (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, Inc.) p. 548.

<sup>37</sup>Toffler, Alvin. Future Shock (New York: Random House, 1970).

<sup>38</sup>Engels. op. cit.

<sup>39</sup>Horney.op. cit., p. 113.