A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF SINGLE MOTHERS CO-PARENTING

by

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ABSTRACT

This study used a phenomenological perspective to investigate the experiences of single mothers co-parenting. A review of literature on changing family patterns, alternative lifestyles and single parenting provides a context for exploring the phenomenon of single mothers choosing to live and parent together.

Three pairs of women participated in audio-taped interviews. Transcripts from the interviews were thematically analyzed using a phenomenological methodology. Accounts of the experiences of the three families are presented and broader themes representing the general experience of all participants are explored.

The participants valued the support and freedom their co-parenting situations offered. They believed that similar values in parenting and ability to communicate openly gave stability to their families and they felt that they were constantly in a process of finding the most satisfying arrangements for sharing household work and parenting. Although the women in this study did not necessarily see themselves committed to a future together, they appreciated the emotional support and validation they received from their co-parent and found their experience of living and parenting together positive and rewarding.

The study concludes with implications for counsellors working with women from alternative family structures and suggests possible directions for future research in this area.

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To all of you, thank you.

DEDICATION

To all of my extended family.

Chapter One

Introduction

Impetus for Study

The impetus for this study arose from my personal experience with extended families. While living in Kenya I spent time with a Kikuyu family where the two young children seemed to have four mothers; their birth mother, an aunt, a grandmother and a family friend seemed to share equally in childcare. The children seemed more a community project than personal possessions of their single mother. A few years later I shared a house for a few months with two single mothers and their four daughters. Parenting and domestic work was shared and there was a depth of caring and emotional support between the two women that provided a refreshing alternative to the struggles I witnessed in friends and clients who were parenting alone. In both the Kikuyu extended family and the Canadian alternative family, I encountered parenting situations that were open, flexible and supportive; they have led me to questioning my definitions and visions of family. I recognize that we live in a society where most people do not live in the same area as their family of origin, and believe that there is an increasing need to create our own family forms and cultivate skills for including friends, children and grandparents in our intimate patterns of living.

Out of this belief came a deep curiosity about the nature of the experience of people who were creating new family forms. My personal interest in peer support and women's psychology particularly drew me to wanting to know more about the histories, experiences and challenges experienced by women who were choosing to live and parent together.

Statement of the Problem

Review of literature on families, experimental lifestyles and single parenting, reveals awareness of the existence of alternative families, but specific research or in depth description is rare. The Vanier Institute for the Family suggests that the emergence of experimental family forms is part of a search for a more familial society and they offer support and encouragement to those exploring new ways of renegotiating family relationships:

> We do not see any one specific family form as holding all the answers for contemporary family living. Rather we see the willingness to establish successful familial living in a variety of modes of being together, be they traditional or innovative, as promising. (1976, p. 1)

However, it seems that research has focussed interest on the devastating effects of the disintegration of the nuclear family and the rise of lone-parenting, and very little emphasis has been given to those individuals who have been quietly pioneering alternative forms of family living and discovering a "variety of modes of being together."

As family structures alter and new forms of child-rearing emerge, there is increasing need for studies that "take us inside the socio-emotional worlds" (Rubin, 1976, p. 14) of people that are choosing new patterns of living. Counsellors are increasingly encountering families that look quite different from the nuclear model they are most often trained to deal with. One emerging form of innovative, familial living is the household headed by single mothers who have chosen to live and parent cooperatively. Helping professionals confronted with the lifestyles, dynamics and dilemmas of families composed of just women and children are challenged to expand definitions of family and develop helping strategies appropriate to new family forms. In order to develop visions of the family that encompass and honor a diversity of family forms, deepened awareness of the phenomenon is necessary. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiential worlds of women who live and parent together and to broaden understanding of the histories, beliefs, feelings and experiences that shape this choice.

Methodological Considerations

Single mothers co-parenting appear to be a fairly new and invisible phenomenon. During the early seventies attention was given to the alternative lifestyles pursued in communes and cooperatives, but review of literature

indicates that there have been few studies investigating the alternative family that exists in shared households. Phenomenological research with its emphasis on understanding "the meaning of events and interactions . . . to people in particular situations" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 31) is an approach well-suited to exploring a new phenomenon; in seeking to understand what meaning participants construct around events and choices (Geertz, 1973), deeper awareness of the concerns and questions particular to this lived experience can emerge and serve as possible departure points for more detailed research.

Van Manen (1984) maintains that an appropriate topic for phenomenological enquiry is determined by "the questioning of the essential nature of a lived experience: a certain way of being in the world. A phenomenological concern always has a two fold character: a preoccupation with both the concreteness as well as the essential nature of a lived experience" (p. 8). Samson (1984) describes a phenomenological approach as being appropriate when "the researcher's goal is not to predict, control, or show quantitative relationships among phenomena but rather to acknowledge, describe, or explore the significance of them" (p. 5). The goal for this study is to explore what the experience of co-parenting is for women who are choosing that particular lifestyle. I am interested in both the concrete details of how women order their lives and function

as a family and I am also interested in what meaning they give to their experience. Phenomenological research is concerned with "turning to the nature of lived experience" and asking "what is the nature of this phenomenon?" (van Manen, 1984, p. 8), and thus seems the methodlogy most appropriate to the research goals of this study.

Contributions of this Study

The personal accounts of women who are co-parenting will hopefully contribute to broadening current understanding of the experiences of alternative families. Part of this contribution lies in simply acknowledging the existence of this phenomenon and noticing its absence from literature on family research. It is intended that the life stories and experiences of the participants will encourage researchers to look more closely at newly emerging support systems and family patterns. Furthermore, it is hoped that the interior perspective on the choices, challenges and emotional issues that shape the lives of women co-parenting, will provide counsellors and helping professionals with an opportunity to expand their vision of the family and deepen their understanding of the experiences of single women pioneering new family forms.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study the following definisions are given.

Nuclear family. Both parents and their children living in their own dwelling.

Single parent family. Synonymous with lone-parent family. Refers to one parent living with children and parenting alone.

Alternative family. A family with a different structure from that found in nuclear or single parent families.

Extended family. Traditional kin networks where various relatives live and parent together.

Cooperative household. A group of unrelated adults with or without children, who live together and share domestic tasks of meal preparation and house maintenance.

Co-parenting. Unrelated adults raising children together.

Family. "The smallest, organized network of kin and nonkin who interact daily providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival" (Stack, 1976, p. 31).

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The search for literature related to single mothers co-parenting took me in diverse directions. Working my way through the Vanier Institute's "Varieties of Family Lifestyles: A Selected Annotated Bibliography" (1977), Olson and Markoff's Inventory of Marriage and Family Literature (1980) and ERIC (1970-1984), I looked under the headings of co-parenting, alternative families, intentional communities and single parenting for possible sources of information. Nothing specific was found that mentioned, explored or explained the phenomenon of single mothers raising children together.

Although the literature provides no mention of this particular form of family, research on single parenting and alternative lifestyles provides a context for examining the social circumstances and philosophies that have led to the emergence of this family form. Jean Heath's extensive study of single parenting explores the current state of the lone-parent family in Canada:

> The stereo-typed family consisting of father, mother and 2.2 children, no longer applies to Canadian society. . . . Amidst all the changes currently taking place, the lone parent family has emerged as one of the fastest growing phenomena. The 1976 census reported 1,048,350 children living in lone parent families of which 83.3% were headed by women. (1980, p. 1)

It is clear that single mothers are an integral part of today's society and that the nuclear family is no longer

the Canadian norm. Research makes it equally clear that parenting alone is a difficult and demanding task:

> In interviews with a sample of 74 single parents the most frequently mentioned need was for counselling services, followed by: day care for children, financial assistance, legal aid and recreational services. These single parents revealed their fear of aloneness, loss of self-esteem, feelings of failure, guilt, depression, hostility, bitterness and the feeling of being overwhelmed by their situation. (Guyatt, 1971, p. 4)

The continual stress of poverty is mentioned repeatedly in literature on single parenting (Guyatt, 1977; Heath, 1980; Skolnik, 1974) and examination of the facts brings new meaning to the cliche "any woman is only a husband away from welfare." Porterfield (1984) points out that:

> As of 1982, one out of every four children (U.S.A.) lived in a single parent home. Ninety percent of those households are headed by women, women who only earn a little more than half of what men earn. Combine those figures with the fact that less than half of non-custodial fathers pay child support and it is no wonder that social scientists have begun to talk about the feminization of poverty. (p. 17)

Recognition of the widespread loneliness and poverty of the single-parent lifestyle provides an understanding of the search for alternatives. An examination of the ideologies and history of the family provides a context for understanding the diversities in its present form.

Despite our cultural tendency to see the nuclear family as one of society's permanent fixtures, it is actually a rather recent invention that has its roots in the Scientific Revolution: "The history of families is the evolution from complex kinship systems to isolated

family structures. . . . It is only in more recent times that we have abstracted one cell of that larger community and identified it as the primary domestic unit" (Chapman, 1978, p. 14). Haveron (1982) suggests that our idealized version of the old American family with "three generations under one roof," was not a norm; due to high mortality rates, "most parents could not have expected to live with their grandchildren" (p. 448). However, kinship systems in neighbourhoods were vital and families were much more flexible in terms of including other adults and participating in the community:

> The tendency of families to include strangers in the household was connected with an entirely different concept of family life. In contrast to the current emphasis on the family as a private retreat, the household of the past was the site of a broad array of functions and activities that transcended the more restricted circle of the nuclear family. . . . This meant that women were involved in a variety of domestic management tasks. . . . They took care of apprentices, boarders and possible other strangers who were placed with the family because they were delinquent youth, orphaned children, or abandoned old men or women. (p. 448)

Although the white middle class family in North America has become increasingly solitary, "the nuclear family as a basic unit has never been especially useful in minority life where extended family networks have frequently meant the difference between survival and dissolution" (Bequaert, 1976, p. 68). Carol Stack (1974) in her studies of kinship systems in a black ghetto describes the cooperative lifestyle of sharing resources,

childcare, goods and services as being a "profoundly creative adaptation to poverty" (p. 43). She noticed that there was not the expectation that "a single person, the natural mother, should carry out by herself all of the behavior patterns which 'motherhood' entails" (p. 44) and emotional, financial and physical support appeared to be an integral part of the fabric of their society:

> I became poignantly aware of the . . . intensity of their acts of domestic cooperation and the exchange of goods and services among these persons, both kin and non kin. Their social and economic lives were so entwined that not to repay an exchange meant that someone else's child would not eat. (p. 28)

Hareven (1982) points out that the alternative forms of family found in black and ethnic communities have been seen by researchers and helping professionals as being signs of "family disorganization" because of their failure to conform to the official stereo-type. However, there is new respect for the flexibility and adaptability of these alternate structures:

> Over the past decade, the strength and resilience of ethnic and black family ways has been recognized. These traditional resources of family and kinship among black and ethnic families have been rediscovered as the middle-class nuclear family, besieged by its own isolation, has proven its limitations in coping with stress. (p. 462)

Although intentional communities seeking utopian alternatives were in existence in America throughout the nineteenth century, it was the youth of the 1960's who consciously rejected the isolation and alienation they

saw in nuclearized society (Moss-Kanter, 1972, p. 311). The creation of communal living situations was often a nostalgic quest for idealized family patterns of the past: "The kind of group today's communes wish to build is one that provides the warmth and intimacy that is found in a family; they want to become, in fact, extended families" (Moss-Kanter, p. 315). In visiting and studying communes throughout North America, Moss-Kanter interviewed and observed various groups of people attempting to "recreate their own version of the extended family of the past in their search for intense, intimate, participatory, meaningful group-based ways of life" (p. 311). She finally concluded that "the extent of the commune movement is vast, but similarly vast are the problems of building viable communes" (p. 312).

Ultimately few communes survive; the reasons are complex and usually entangled with conflicting ideals and human foibles. However, the lasting influence of the communal movement of the sixties may be found

> in the break with the ideological monopoly held by the nuclear family . . . it has helped move family preferences out of the realm of pathology and deviance and into the realm of value and choice. . . . The commune movement, along with the counterculture in general, helped to bring about a recognition of the possibilities of diversity in family life and legitimate experimentation in family forms. (Skolnik, 1974, p. 150)

Hareven (1982) suggests that many different family forms have been in existence all along, but they have been less

visible and less accepted. She expresses optimism about alternative patterns of living being integrated into socially condoned choices:

> The more recent forms of alternative lifestyles have now become part of the official fiber of society, because they are now being tolerated much more than in the past. What we are witnessing is not a fragmentation of traditional family patterns, but, rather, the emergence of a pluralism in family ways. (p. 463)

One of the family forms that emerged in the sixties and is still prevalent is the housing cooperative. Zablocki (1972) has suggested that the most common, successful and least studied communes are those involving two to four couples who decide to live together in the same household: "These are the least observable kinds of communes because they are formed quietly by close friends who decide to merge households."

As well as couples and groups of friends joining together to form supportive living situations, single mothers also began exploring alternatives to their isolation. Bequaert (1976) in a study on single women, reports seeing "more and more single women joining together, actively forging new kinds of social supports and networks that are adapted to their new lifestyles and their own needs" (p. 85). One women's cooperative she interviewed was considering buying a house "which would serve as a gathering place where women and their children could dine communally" (p. 87).

Mackay, Wallace and Nagler (1982) also describe women's cooperatives attempting to find ways of sharing childcare.

A sign in one women's centre reads: "PUT A LITTLE SUNSHINE IN YOUR LIFE . . . SPEND TIME WITH A KID TODAY . . . (some of us are suffering from third degree burns!)" Feminist analysis sees mothers as needing support and validation in the work they are doing and encourages parents and nonparents to take responsibility for children:

> Anything we can do to relieve the isolation of a child with one or two responsible adults would be a step in the right direction. Non-mothering adults could make themselves available to care for a child once a month, or once a week. From this contact, the child would learn to depend on other adults, be given reinforcement for its values and learn to see itself as a person, independent of its mother. Meanwhile, of course, the mother would get some time to herself. (Wallace, Mackay & Nagler, 1982, p. 11)

Utopian novels Motherlines by Suzy Charnass and Woman on the Edge of Time by Marge Piercey have coined the terms "sharemothering" and "co-mothering" as ways of describing groups of adults who take on nurturing child-rearing responsibilities; they provide visions of societies where children are not the sole responsibility of their birth parents but are cared for by groups of committed men and women.

Shirley Glubka (1983) in an article entitled "Out of the Stream: An Essay on Unconventional Motherhood," describes her search for ways to "break the isolation of single motherhood" and gives an account of her experience of shared parenting in a communal household:

> I tried communal living in what seemed to be an ideal situation--with other women from my consciousness raising group, other children,

> and a few politically aware, thoroughly sincere men. We based our experiment on feminist principles. All work including childcare was divided equally among us. The experiment was a success--for a year. The reasons for the disintegration of many living situation are, to say the least, hard to catch hold of. I could say we had personality conflicts; I could say it was extremely difficult to maintain a way of living that was unsupported by society at large. Both the purely personal and the social/ political explanations would be true and even taken together they are not all of the truth. For whatever complex combination of reasons our collective household split apart. (p. 224)

Literature and research on alternative families show only these momentary glimples of the feelings and personal issues of participants. Although experimentation with parenting, roles and family structures has continued to be vital, it has also remained a largely invisible and mysterious phenomenon.

Recently, cooperative living arrangements have moved out of the domain of the counterculture and have received American Funding. Warren Village in Boulder, Colorado is a housing complex offering counselling services, a childcare centre and a job skills centre to ninety-six single parent families. Each family has its own apartment, but all are encouraged to share resources and operate as tribal villages and kinship networks might have in earlier times (Porterfield, 1984).

On a smaller scale there has been a burgeoning of organizations throughout the United States whose sole purpose is to match people wanting to share homes. Outfits such as Project Home Share, Household Matching Services and

Operation Share-a-Home work at finding grandparents that want to live with single parent families, singles that want to buy a home together, single parent families that want to share resources and any other permutation of people seeking housemates. Unlike the intentional communities of the commune era, contemporary shared living arrangements often arise from practical needs: "As the number of house sharers increase, so do their reasons for doing so. Some people want help with house payments, some want companionship; some want household help; some have left their family home and need a place to live" (Gerwig, 1982, p. 15).

Although the financial reasons often provide the incentive for housesharing, one single parent stated that there is definitely more to it than a good investment: "The single life sometimes is a lonely life. If you can have a compatible person with you, I think it makes everyday life that much easier" (Gerwig, 1982, p. 16). Or in other words: "It's nice to have someone besides the cat to come home to, and it's a lot more fun to share cooking and dishwashing with another person" (Tone & Sclar, 1985, p. 4). Hare and Brissin (1984) suggest that all these new opportunities "are really re-invention of some form of extended family living, a reaction to having gone too far down the suburban road of single-family zoning" (p. 18).

Shared housing has opened many new options for people to find creative ways to arrange their living situations.

However, while shared housing can solve some problems, it can also create others. One of these problems is addressed by Emily, a six year old character in a children's book entitled Lots of Mommies:

> Emily thought about her family. Was there a word for what she had? She thought about the way everyone in her family took care of her. "I have lots of mommies," she said. Before she could explain, the other children began to laugh at her.

It is not always easy to choose an alternative living situation in a society that is often unreceptive to that choice. Furthermore, people often enter shared living arrangements with varying abilities to communicate and willingness to tolerate differences in others. When a "number of different personalities try to occupy the same space at the same time . . . no matter how well intentioned everyone is, conflicts will arise" (Teone & Sclar, 1985, p. 5). The way in which these conflicts are dealt with and the unique patterning of roles, rules and bonds found in alternative families is an area of interest minimally addressed in literature on alternative lifestyles. Carol Stack (1974) points out that "an arbitrary imposition of widely accepted definitions of family, blocks the way to understanding how people . . . order the world in which they live" (p. 31). In order to expand definitions of the family it seems necessary to go to the individuals who are creating new family forms and ask them about the nature of their experience. The present study will

facilitate deep exploration of the qualitative experience of women who are choosing new family patterns.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Concept

Phenomenological research involves asking questions about the nature of human experience (Colaizzi, 1979). The following words, spoken by a poor black man in Alice Walker's novel, The Color Purple, address some of the questions phenomenological researchers are trying to grasp:

> "Anyhow, he say, you know how it is. You ast yourself one question, it lead to fifteen. I start to wonder why us need love. Why us suffer. Why us black. Why us men and women. Where do children really come from. It didn't take long to realize I didn't hardly know nothing. And that if you ast yourself why you black or a man or a woman or a bush it don't mean nothing if you don't ast why you here period.
>
> So what you think? I ast.
>
> I think us here to wonder, myself. To wonder. To ast. And in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things you learn about the little ones almost by accident . . . the more I wonder, he say, the more I love."
> (1982, p. 247)

Phenomenological research is a process of "wondering" about what it means to be alive in a particular context and circumstance. It asks both "big" questions and "little" questions in an attempt to gain glimpses of the practical, concrete details of everyday life and a sense of the "essence" of living that everyday experience embodies (Colaizzi, 1979; van Manen, 1984). Unlike most other sciences, phenomenology does not "offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can explain

and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights which brings us in more direct contact with the world" (van Manen, 1984, p. 1). For instance, in studying the phenomenon of single mothers co-parenting, I am not exclusively interested in the prevalence of the situation or how it deviates from the norm of Canadian families; I am most interested in what the situation looks and feels like to those experiencing it.

In order to allow a phenomenon to reveal itself as purely as possible, it is the investigator's responsibility to listen openly and respectfully to the phenomenon and allow it to speak for itself as much as possible (Hunnisett, 1983). However, it is also important to recognize that research is "always a project of someone: a real person, who, in the context of particular individual, social and historical life circumstances sets out to make sense of a certain aspect of human existence" (van Manen, 1984, p. 4). In this case the particular someone is me, and it is essential that as I set out to make sense of the phenomenon of single mothers co-parenting, I search myself and make explicit my own assumptions and presuppositions so as not to implicitly impose them on the phenomenon under study (Harris, 1986, p. 24).

Personal Assumptions of the Researcher

From my personal contact with single mothers co-parenting and my reading about alternative families, I

have formulated the following assumptions, hunches and beliefs about the particular phenomenon:

1. The choice to co-parent often arises out of practical and financial needs.

2. Women find it emotionally supportive to have another adult to share parenting with.

3. Conflicts will arise out of differences in values and styles of parenting.

4. Women's outside relationships will be stressful to the family.

5. There will not be a commitment to a future together.

6. Co-parenting can be a creative and nurturing lifestyle choice.

Rationale for Methodology

Studies of families that are phenomenological and attempt to elicit interior perspectives on the family are rare and their value is only recently gaining appreciation in the social sciences (LaRossa & Wolf, 1985, p. 531). There is a newly recognized need for research that explores the direct experience of being a part of a family:

> We have probability statistics on marriage, divorce, sexual behavior, and much, much more; but they tell us nothing of the experience of the flesh-and-blood women and men who make up the numbers. This is not a failure of those studies; they are not designed to do so. . . . But, we also need social science that is so

> designed--qualitative studies that can capture the fullness of experience, the richness of living. We need work that takes us inside the family dynamics, into the socio-emotional world in which people are born, live and die. (Rubin, 1976, p. 14)

While family research in general is seeing a need to turn away from "large scale definitive studies to do more exploratory descriptive research, involving small, nonrepresentative samples" (Hill, 1981, p. 256), the alternative family is a particular understudied phenomenon well-suited to qualitative methodologies.

For this particular study of single mothers co-parenting a phenomenological methodology has been chosen to explore the meaning and experience of those choosing this alternative parenting structure. The rationale for this choice is as follows:

1. This is an unstudied phenomenon. No direct research on single mothers co-parenting was found in the available literature. Qualitative research encourages participants to tell their own stories and recognizes that those immersed in an experience are the experts in the field of study. The researcher can maintain "fidelity to the phenomenon as it is lived" (Giorgi, 1975, p. 99), by allowing participants themselves to articulate and describe the histories, themes and experiences of their lives. From initial exploration of the qualitative experiences of the participants, it is expected that a variety of themes and research questions will emerge to serve as

possible departure points for more detailed research in this area.

2. One of the study's aims is to broaden current understanding of the alternative family. In particular, it aims to give counsellors a deeper awareness of the issues, feelings and dynamics between women who have chosen a co-parenting lifestyle. Because counsellors are continually working with the emotional life stories of their clients, the case-study approach to research seems the most appropriate way to illuminate the inner world of the participants and provide insight into the ways they make meaning of their lives. Phenomenological research presents a richness of detail and nuance that allows counsellors to empathize with the participants and consequently understand more fully the needs and dilemmas specific to alternative families.

3. This study is about women. It is about their experiences, their choices and their emotional responses to the worlds they have created. Gilligan (1982) comments that "the psychology of women that has consistently been described as distinctive in its greater orientation towards relationships and interdependence, implies a more contextual mode of judgement" (p. 22). She also speaks of the need for clearer understanding of how women see themselves and how women's psychology does differ from mainstream psychological theory. She charges that "only when theorists

divide their attention and begin to live with women as they have lived with men will their vision encompass the experience of both sexes and their theories become correspondingly more fertile" (p. 23). In a similar vein, Schaeff argues that therapists and researchers must find ways of "confirming the female experience . . . and validating women's experience of their own reality" (1981, p. 89).

In an analysis of qualitative family studies LaRossa and Wolf (1985) found that women are more likely to do primarily qualitative research. In speculating the reasons for this they suggest that:

> There are two possible reasons why women are more likely than men to do qualitative family research and each may be correct. The first is that men may be making a special effort not to do qualitative family research. . . . Does qualitative family research not square with the image of the hardnosed researcher cutting through emotional fluff to get "just the facts"? . . . The second reason that women are more likely than men to do qualitative family research is that women may simply be more attracted to qualitative work. If this is the case, we wonder what women see that men do not? Feminists would say that women see a methodology more amenable to a feminist perspective. They would say that qualitative research is important to their cause because it encourages scholars to perceive things in nontraditional ways. (p. 537)

It would seem that qualitative research methods offer a "contextual mode" for tapping into women's perceptions and feelings and expanding understanding of women's psychology. In aiming to "gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world" (VanManen, 1985, p. 1),

qualitative research provides a medium for "living with women" in a way that respects their experience:

> As we research the possible meaning structures of our lived experiences, we come to a fuller grasp of what it means to be in the world as a man, a woman, a child, taking into account the sociocultural and the historical traditions which have given meaning to our ways of being in the world. For example, to understand what it means to be a woman in our present age is also to understand the pressures of the meaning structures which have come to restrict, widen, or question the nature or ground of womanhood. Phenomenological research is a search for the fullness of living, for the ways a woman possibly can experience the world as woman, for what it is to be a woman. (Van Manen, 1985, p. 1)

Selection of Participants

Before I began interviewing, I was aware, through my own networks of friends, counselling practicums and experience with peer counselling of about a dozen families where single mothers were co-parenting together. In choosing which pairs to interview, I decided not to approach lesbian couples that were parenting together because there has been research in this area and I was specifically interested in seeing how women who did not have an intimate, sexual partnership would view their relationships, parenting and family.

Bronwyn and Jennifer (pseudonyms) were the first women I approached about the study. A year and a half earlier when they had first started living and parenting together, they had taken a course that I was co-facilitating

in Peer Counselling Skills for Women and I knew that they were women well able to "articulate experience at conceptual and emotional levels" (Hunnisett, 1982, p. 21). In Carol and Krista's case I had known Carol for several years and had briefly lived in their house when she and Gwen were co-parenting together. My familiarity with the home and children helped me to give the interview a context. I also chose them because they were, in a very real sense, a blended family; Carol and Gwen had co-parented for five years and Krista had moved into this situation, more or less replacing Gwen, eight months previously. Carol's experience with both situations seemed valuable to me.

My third pair of women, Judith and Sarah, were women referred to me by an acquaintance. Part of my decision to interview them was based on the fact that they had four sons and my other participants were co-parenting daughters. The idea of parenting four young boys sounded quite overwhelming and intriguing to me and I was curious to know what that experience looked like and felt like to the women who had chosen to do it. The fact that I had not met either of these women prior to the interview did make it somewhat more awkward initially. However, we took some time to chat and get comfortable with one another and their spontaneous humour and willingness to share their experiences openly eased the way considerably.

The Interviews

Interviews took place in the women's homes. Before we began taping, I told them about my interest in this topic, had them read and sign the consent forms and showed them my four focussing questions:

1. How did you come to choose this situation?

2. How do you work out parenting and domestic arrangements?

3. Tell me about your relationship with each other.

4. What would be your guess about the future of your family?

I also assured them that these areas of interest were simply suggestions and that anything that they thought was relevant and important to their experience of living together was of interest to me. I saw my function as an interviewer as "simply to encourage the respondent to talk about a given topic with a minimum of direct questioning and guiding . . . and to serve as a catalyst for a comprehensive expression of the subject's feelings and beliefs" (Kidder, 1981, p. 190). Colaizzi (1978) talks of imaginative listening as being the art of being deeply present for those expressing their experience and I tried to "stay out of the way" of the women's dialogue as much as possible. Throughout the interviews I used active listening skills and clarifying questions to encourage the discussion. At times I also self-disclosed

about my experience and sometimes asked direct questions about aspects of their life I wanted to know more about. Each interview lasted for approximately an hour and a half. I also had time both before and after the taping to talk with the women, visit with the children and gather my own impressions of the household. As soon as I returned from each interview, I wrote journal notes about my experience of the interview. Much of the journal notes are stream of consciousness impressions of the women and children and my own feelings being around them and spending time in their home. These journal notes were later used to develop a descriptive introduction to each family.

Analysis

Each interview was first listened to in its entirety to get an overall sense of the experience. I then proceeded with the task of transcribing, verbatim, each transcript. With all the transcripts done, I read each one again, listening to the audio-tape, and began the process of trying to find the best way to organize the data so the women's experiences could most clearly emerge. Giorgi (1975) suggests organizing statements into "meaning units," or chunks of speech in which an idea or experience is expressed. To do this, I hired a research assistant, a woman familiar with qualitative research methods and unfamiliar with any of my participants. First we went

through each transcript and divided the speech into units that clearly expressed one idea or theme. We then wrote each separate meaning unit on a card, grouping them in thematic categories as we went along. Each family had different coloured cards and each quotation was cross-referenced so it could easily be found again in the context of the interview. Thematic categories arose from the content of their statements. If I was writing on a card, "Now that I have a child I can't imagine what it would be like living alone," I would formulate the theme as being, "reasons for living together," and then put any other similar statements in the same pile. Throughout this process I found it was helpful having another person with me to share the process of dismantling the interviews into units; because I was so immersed in the data at this time, I valued having the "reality check" of someone I could talk to about my perceptions of the themes and categories.

At the end of this process, data from each interview had become a series of piles of cards on my living room floor. I then sorted through each pile, sometimes altering or joining categories, and finally putting the categories in the chronological order of past experiences shaping the choice to live together, present experiences of parenting, domesticity and relationship, and finally, their thoughts about the future. I then began writing a description of the experience of each family. To set a context and give

the reader a vivid sense of these being real people, I started first with my personal impressions of the women and their household based on my journal notes. I then proceeded to use each pile of cards, each thematic category, as a paragraph or a section of the description. From each pile of cards, I tried to choose quotations that most clearly expressed the salient theme of their experience and through these quotations, let the voices of the women tell their stories. Initially I began writing "about" what the women had said, attempting to interpret and summarize their words. However, I found I was losing the vitality and directness of their experience, so I tried, as much as possible, to let their actual undiluted responses speak of what it is like for them to live and parent together.

For analysis of group findings, I again sorted all the cards with meaning units and this time allowed categories and themes to emerge from all three family situations. The themes were then written up to show both the commonalities and the diversities among the participants.

Member Checks

As I completed writing about each family, I contacted them again and set up times to meet with them and have them read what I had written. Guba and Lincoln (1981) believe that "the determination of credibility can be

accomplished only be taking data and interpretations to the source from which they were drawn and asking directly whether they believe, find plausible--the results." Similarly, Lillian Rubin (1976) went back to the families she had been interviewing asking for confirmation and feedback on her findings and reminded them: "It's your life I've been writing about. You're the only one who can tell me whether I've understood it or not, whether the picture I've drawn is a true one" (p. 213). I explained my purpose in returning to the families in a similar way. I explained to the women my process of transcribing the tapes, formulating meaning units and writing the descriptive protocols and asked them to read carefully what I had written about them. I encouraged them to share their reactions and add, change or delete anything that did not seem to accurately portray their experience. Although there were some biographical details needing to be changed, there was very little alteration of the feelings and thoughts expressed. One pair added a section that they felt I should have paid more attention to and most of the women expressed their enjoyment in reading about themselves and seeing in print the articulation of their experience and ideas.

Chapter Four

Research Findings

This chapter presents a narrative account of the experiences of each of the three participant families. A map for each family gives indication of the people mentioned in the interview, their ages and approximate dates of joinings and partings. The second section of this chapter includes the broader themes that emerged from the analysis of the data from all three families.

Jennifer and Bronwyn

It was bedtime when I arrived at Bronwyn and Jennifer's house for our first interview. Jennifer's parents, visiting for a few days from out of town, were curled comfortably on the couch reading while Jennifer finished a bedtime story for Aubrie and Emma and tucked them into their bunk beds. Having just arrived out of the cold and rain, the soft kitchen light and sleepy voices of children and grandparents seemed particularly warm and welcoming. As we set up the recorder in Bronwyn's room there was much laughter and teasing; between the women there was the comfort and ease particular to people who know each other well and enjoy one another's company.

With the children in bed and lights off, the three of us settled comfortably into Bronwyn's bedroom. As we

Family Map: Jennifer and Bronwyn

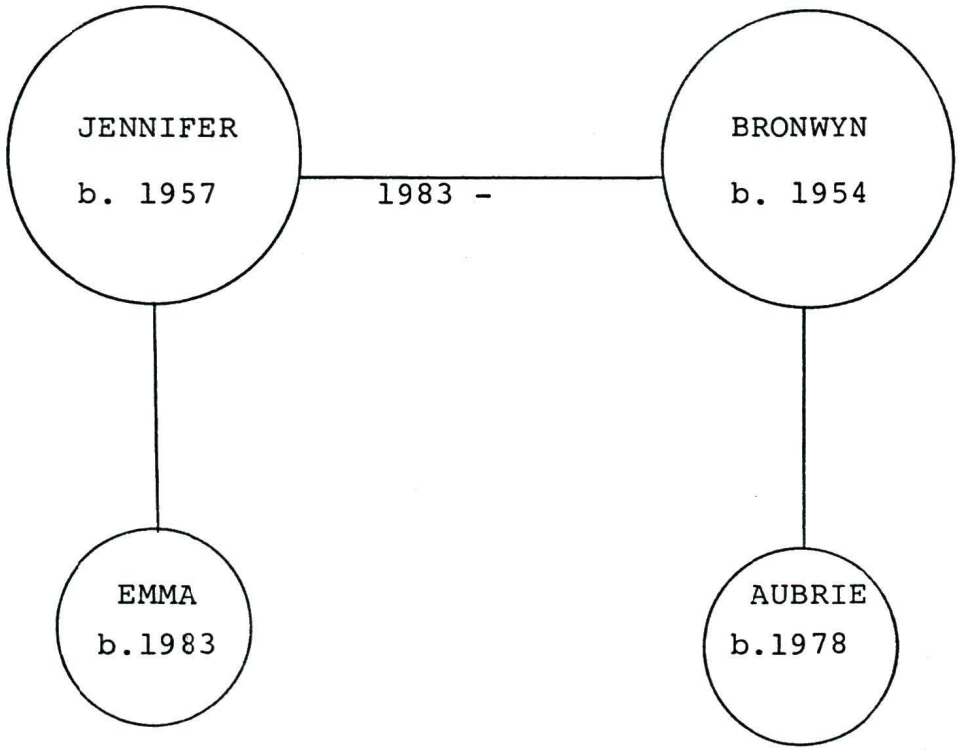

Figure 1

began to talk about what had brought them together into their present living situation, both women mentioned a sense of "shared history" and talked of the fact that their lives had "intersected for years." Bronwyn and Jennifer met each other six years ago in a small community in the Northwest Territories. Their initial contact was made at a meeting of the Northern Women's Collective and they proceeded to participate in the collective together for the following three years. As is common in small communities, their professional and personal lives soon became interwoven as Jennifer began teaching Bronwyn's daughter in the local day care and Bronwyn was hired by Jennifer's husband. In 1983, when Jennifer gave birth to Emma, Bronwyn was invited to be part of the birth as a labour coach and support person.

Nine months later when Jennifer decided to leave her marriage she moved to the West Coast and prepared to start a University Program in the fall. Initially Jennifer appreciated the independence of being a single parent, but a visit from a friend made her reconsider her choice to live alone:

> I really enjoyed the first few months I had alone with Emma, and I was doing a lot of sorting out for myself. Then I had a friend come to visit. I had forgotten how much fun it was to have someone to have tea with once Emma was in bed--an adult to talk to, someone to moan with, someone who would give me a hug of support.

Knowing that Bronwyn was coming to Victoria to live in the fall, Jennifer wrote asking her to consider the idea of sharing a home.

Bronwyn initially felt somewhat apprehensive: "When Jennifer first approached me, I felt some ambivalence because I had been living alone for so long and thought it would be difficult to work things out with someone." She also recognized that they "had both come out of situations that hadn't worked" and wondered what it would be like to deal with all the issues involved in living with someone again. However, she had already experienced a year of being a single mother and a student and had found it draining and lonely: "Being a student with a child there's not very much money and it's hard to get out. It's really time consuming. You don't have any social life or time for anything but your child and your work." The thought of having the support and company was appealing and the fact that she liked and trusted Jennifer gave her the impetus to accept the house-sharing offer.

Through letters and telephone conversations they began a process of clarifying what they each wanted and needed from the situation. Some of the negotiation concerned the practical details of finding a house near Aubrie's school and there was a brief conversation about money:

> Bronwyn: I think we talked a bit about money.
> Jennifer: Yeah. I think we thought we might save money, but then when it came down to renting the house we realized we wouldn't save anything.

Discussion also involved serious bartering:

> Jennifer: I wanted a non-smoking household and Bronwyn wanted as little television as possible.
> Bronwyn: They were a trade-off. I agreed I would smoke only in my room and Jennifer agreed that she wouldn't turn on the TV while the kids were up.
> Jennifer: I love watching TV so we were real martyrs for each other.

Bronwyn also wanted a commitment to "calling things" and talking openly about issues in their relationship: "I was nervous that we wouldn't talk openly and that we would get into a pattern of storing things . . . that if there were frustrations and stuff you would hold them in and not talk about them." Jennifer agreed to try and honour this commitment and acknowledged that it was Bronwyn's integrity that gave her confidence in the relationship:

> Jennifer: I trusted Bronwyn. I knew she would be straight at all times. I had a history at that stage where I wasn't always honest--I just kept everything inside so much. I knew I needed someone who wasn't like that or it wouldn't work. Bronwyn was always good at calling what was happening.

In these initial tasks there was also recognition that the first few weeks would be difficult. As well as adjusting to living with each other, they also needed to come to terms with living with each other's children and the children needed time to establish their relationship with each other: "We talked about allowing an adjustment period. That we would give ourselves six weeks or so without getting too upset. We knew it would take some time."

To begin with each mother did have some difficulty getting used to the age and temperament of the other's child:

> Bronwyn: It was hard at first. Em was only fifteen months old then. I found it hard to adjust to her crying when she was upset or in a bad mood because I was totally out of that stage of parenting. Jennifer found it hard at dinner time because that was the time that Aubrie and I had established to talk to each other and she pretty well had the floor. When we ate she ran the show and that was driving Jennifer crazy.

As well as remembering the tensions in their first weeks together, both women also recall enjoying "the mutual support and company." At this time they also took a course in peer counselling skills which stimulated exploration and sharing:

> Bronwyn: We worked really hard on our relationship. We also went to Gynergetics (peer counselling) together at the same time.
> Jennifer: It was great for our relationship.
> Bronwyn: Because we just talked so much. That first whole winter we talked a lot--just everything that came up, we went over.
> Jennifer: Every night after the kids went to bed, we'd start having tea and suddenly realize it was 11:30.
> Bronwyn: We talked about things we were trying to work through, patterns we have. We talked a lot about relationships--our vulnerabilities and insecurities.
> Jennifer: We cried . . . I cried a lot.

As they talked and cried and shared together the two women began "getting closer and closer to a common language." Their own childhoods and family histories came into focus when they began to examine their differing perceptions of privacy and closed doors. The issue became important when

Jennifer was feeling irritated by Aubrie continually coming into her room or crawling into her bed in the morning:

> Jennifer: I just had a really hard time saying "Aubrie I need space--go away--give me some time." So usually I would put up with it but would be frustrated.

As Bronwyn and Jennifer began to talk about what was going on, they recognized the different family messages they'd received about bedrooms and closed doors and they acknowledged how much that still affected their values and behavior:

> Jennifer: In my family an open door meant we could come and go any time and my mother never closed her door on us. My mother and dad never had private time and there just weren't closed doors--it didn't seem right for a mother to do that. But for Bronwyn the fact that she had the door closed didn't mean she wasn't accessible. I was misinterpreting her messages.
>
> Bronwyn: I can't sleep with the door open. I'm just private that way--it's the way I was brought up. As a child I always slept with my door closed and when I played in my bedroom I shut the door. So now when I come in here to work I always shut the door and Jennifer thought I didn't want to be disturbed.
>
> Jennifer: It was just something we had to clarify. We had different family histories and expectations.

Jennifer's reluctance to say "no" to Aubrie was indicative of a role she had adopted from her mother; it was "part of being the nurturer and just always expecting that I should give, give, give!" In her living relationship with Bronwyn, Jennifer has begun to question those patterns and explore different ways of communicating:

> Jennifer: Limits have always been a problem for me--that goes back to what I said about finding a common language. I've learned I can say "no" and Bronwyn doesn't hate me if I don't want to look after Aubrie tonight. I'm learning to say, "Bronwyn, I need this now. Will you please look after Aubrie? Will you please look after Emma?" I'm requesting and asking for help.

A few night previous to our interview, a confrontation around cooking had brought the "limits" issue into focus again but, the speed and the ease with which they sorted it out was encouraging to both, and they acknowledged that they were "getting better at it." Jennifer was cooking in the kitchen and Bronwyn came in, looked in the pots and thought that perhaps there wasn't going to be enough for dinner. She began puttering around and making something extra for the meal, but quickly realized that Jennifer was not comfortable: "She was quite obviously not happy--I know something was up." For Jennifer, Bronwyn's presence in the kitchen was something she had often felt bothered by. Unlike Bronwyn who made it very clear when she was in the kitchen "everyone else out," Jennifer had never said anything about her sense of being "intruded upon," and Bronwyn had no idea that her puttering was bothersome: "I never even thought Jennifer cared--I mean I'd go around looking in pots and giving suggestions. It was never a reflection on your cooking--it just never occurred to me that it bothered you." They sat down to dinner with Jennifer still fuming, but quickly worked it out:

> Jennifer: It only took about fifteen minutes. It was just Bronwyn saying, "Well you've never said anything before," and me saying, "Well this is what you've done before and how it's bothered me. Please don't do it again." She acknowledged that what she'd done was wrong--coming in and not expecting that I knew enough to make enough dinner and I acknowledged that I should have set limits sooner. And all through this intense discussion, Aubrie's talking away and Emma's playing--it was great--a big hug afterwards.

For the most part, the sharing of cooking and housework has worked very smoothly and the roles and patterns have grown organically out of their own personal needs and habits:

> Jennifer: I'm a morning person and Bronwyn isn't. My bad time is 5 o'clock, so she often cooks during the week and I cook on the weekends. She takes my bad time and cooks and takes responsibility for the kids.
>
> Bronwyn: and Jennifer is often with them in the mornings so I can sleep in.

The fact that they both have similar expectations about the shape of the house and that there is "a lot of mutual respect," has given their domestic situation great stability and comfort:

> Bronwyn: We never have an issue over the housework--we both pitch in. If someone washes the kitchen floor and vacuums one time, it's just automatic that the other does it the next time.
>
> Jennifer: Bronwyn doesn't expect me to pick up her clothes and she cleans the bathtub every second time. We both pick up after our kids when they go to bed and make sure they pick up as much as they can. There's sharing and a lot of things have just evolved. One has taken responsibility for something at a particular time and it has worked out so we have kept it up and trade back and forth.

Similar values about parenting have also contributed to the smooth running of their household:

> Bronwyn: We are similar in that we don't spank our kids--or only on a rare occasion. We don't yell at the kids. There is just very conscientious parenting on both sides. It isn't stressful that way. I don't worry about what Jennifer is going to do with Aubrie or Emma for that matter.
>
> Jennifer: There's a united front too for the kids. They know that there are certain behavior expectations and that both Bronwyn and I have similar ideas. They won't get away with something with one of us when the other isn't around.

One of the things that they did have to sort out was their relationships and responsibilities towards the other person's child. They agreed that if "Aubrie or Emma was doing something to the other person, not the natural parent, then the natural parent would not interfere with the disciplinary process." So for instance, in the situation where Aubrie was continually going into Jennifer's room, Bronwyn talked to her daughter about privacy, but it was up to Jennifer to enforce the limits she had set. There was also an implicit agreement to tell the other person what it was that had been done so both parents always knew what was going on.

Like the housework issues, their style of parenting together has "just sort of evolved":

> Bronwyn: We do co-parent and we also take responsibility for our own children. We each get our own child ready in the morning and that sort of stuff, but if one of us is in the kitchen and they're having breakfast or whatever...
>
> Jennifer: then whoever is around takes care of the situation.
>
> Bronwyn: The kids feel free to call on whoever's closest.

Both women also recognize that their parenting styles have changed with the support and influence of the other person. Jennifer has appreciated Bronwyn's consistency and solid sense of boundaries and limits: "She's helped me learn not to feel that because I'm a mother, therefore I give all--at the expense of me!" Breaking her habit of always going to Emma when she cried was a difficult trial for Jennifer and she remembers the comfort and support she got from Bronwyn:

> Jennifer: She just sat through long nights with me. She'd say, "Jennifer, let her cry--now come on, it's only been five minutes." She'd hold my hand and talk. I don't know what we'd do, but she'd sit there with me.

Bronwyn also recognizes that her relationship with her daughter has changed since she and Jennifer have been living together:

> Bronwyn: We do have very different parenting styles and we've learned a lot from each other I think. Jennifer is a lot more of a nurturing parent than I am. She'll do things like put little goodies in Aubrie's lunch. I'd always make a totally healthy lunch and there'd never by anything like treats or concessions. I was so strict that way, which was the way I was brought up too--not wanting to indulge or spoil. I've become less strict and more flexible.

The positive reactions of friends and family about the children also adds to the mothers' confidence in their parenting: "People are always commenting on our kids--how outgoing they are and how happy they seem. I think we are doing a pretty good job and I know I'm doing a good job because I have Bronwyn's support."

While the domestic issues of housework and parenting have worked out fairly smoothly for Jennifer and Bronwyn, the major stresses they have dealt with have been around relationships. Bronwyn is lesbian and Jennifer is straight. Bronwyn is involved in a relationship and Jennifer is single. Both of these differences have created confusion and tension.

There have been times when Jennifer has found the tumultuousness of Bronwyn's relationship difficult to handle. At one point Jennifer was dealing with a very heavy course load at the university and her mother was undergoing serious surgery in the hospital. The constant turmoil of Bronwyn's relationship became too much for her to handle: "They were either at each other's throats or madly in love and I just couldn't take it anymore." For a few weeks she removed herself from Bronwyn as a support system on that particular issue. Bronwyn missed the support, but also respected Jennifer's wishes:

> Bronwyn: It was really hard at first because we had really nurtured that relationship so we were sounding boards for each other. I had always felt perfectly free whenever things came up to talk and Jennifer always had an ear, was always there. I was amazed in fact that she never had said anything before.

Recognizing that she needed time to rest, Jennifer went to Hawaii for a week while Bronwyn looked after the kids. On her return, she and Bronwyn had a dinner date, talked for hours and she expressed her willingness once again to "be there" for whatever Bronwyn was going through. They also recognized that Bronwyn's relationship intensified the fact that Jennifer was alone:

> Jennifer: It accents my loneliness. There's either stress because they're fighting or there's stress because they're so happy and having such close times together and I'm alone--so we talk it out one more time.

And, they spend time exploring options for Jennifer:

> Bronwyn: We also devote a fair amount of effort to trying to figure out things for you--ways to meet men, because this is such a women oriented house and just getting to meet men isn't easy.

One particularly tangled situation occurred when Jennifer began dating the man who had gone out with Bronwyn's lover. They both agree that the situation "got very strange" and Jennifer remembers everyone trying to be mature and rational about it all: "The stresses were awful and we were all trying to be very adult and very West Coast about the whole thing--it makes me want to puke." Despite a "few tense moments," the experience of working through each of these stresses brought the two women closer and their commitment to "talking things out" gave the relationship the strength and resilience to weather the tensions.

Although both women were open about talking about the difficult times they've had and how they have dealt with problems in their relationship, they also wanted to make it clear that there were aspects of their family that were fun and rewarding:

> Bronwyn: We've talked a lot about issues tonight, but I don't think we've talked as much about all the good stuff--and I think there is an incredible amount of good stuff in this house... so although we've had a lot of work to do, this is home and it's safe.

Jennifer also emphasized the "consistency and family feeling of shared meals," having baths with the kids and "doing a lot of physical things together like jumping on Bronwyn in bed in the morning."

Both women see their present family as being quite different from the families they grew up in and the families they lived in with the fathers of their children. One of the main differences has been the depth of communication that they have established with each other:

> Bronwyn: I don't think I've ever done this much talking in any other situation. With Aubrie's Dad communication was really different and this kind of support was not there.
>
> Jennifer: I think now--with hindsight of course--that if I had had these language skills in my marriage who knows what would have happened. But, instead I'd go to the bathroom and cry and I just took all the stuff I got dished out. I shouldn't have. My husband didn't know half the stuff I was concerned about and I wasn't very honest with him.

They also recognize that the sexual intimacy of a marriage "automatically adds different stresses," and for them, living together as friends, "there isn't the same kind of loading of issues that there would be with a lover." Jennifer also sees this family as having a balance and equality that she hadn't experienced before:

> Jennifer: In both my own family and my marriage there was definitely a power structure--a head and a follower. Our situation here feels so equal and so respectful on both sides. This is the way I envision a nuclear family, the perfect nuclear family, but I don't know many people that have it--except other women.

Despite the fact that both women feel committed to the family they have created, their future "is up in the air right now." Last summer they were able to accommodate job changes and both women and their children moved north together for four months. In the fall Jennifer moved back down to the coast with the children and settled Aubrie in school while Bronwyn finished the last month of her contract. This year Jennifer has applied for a journalism program that might take her, at least temporarily, to Eastern Canada and it is likely that Bronwyn's government work will lead her back towards the Northwest Territories for the summer. Although both acknowledge that they are making career choices that may take them in different directions, neither are very happy about the prospect of separating:

> Jennifer: The thought of losing Bronwyn is horrible, but I also know that this program is important to me. So, I don't know how long this family unit will last, but I know that if there's any way I have any choice in it I would keep it... I would live with Bronwyn in a flash--anytime without a second thought.
>
> Bronwyn: Although Jennifer and I have had a lot of work to do this is also a very solid, stable home base and I'm afraid of leaving that and all I get from it--I get a lot and so does Aubrie. I'm very attached to all of this... it's my family.

Whatever direction they go in, both women feel confident that their lives will intersect in years to come:

> Jennifer: Our time together, our children, our interactions with each other and with each other's children--we'll always have that bond and the ability to go to the other person.

> Bronwyn: I feel a future with Jennifer. We've been through so much together. We have a very strong bond and I don't think that will be severed.

As I finished the interview and turned off the tape recorder, all three of us were quiet and it seemed that thoughts of the future left big questions hanging in the air. Jennifer reached over and softly touched Bronwyn's shoulder. Bronwyn collected the tea cups and went to check the sleeping children.

Carol and Krista

Dinner is always an event at the Pearl Street house. We all sat down at a dining room table loaded with food and flowers and held hands while Bonnie, aged five, said grace: "God is great, God is good, Thank you God for the food. A-kids, A-women, A-men." In a home filled with women and girls, the regular "Amen" had seemed lacking so the family had come up with the alternative. Dinner began with all the fuss common to families with small children: "I hate eggplant. Do I have to eat this?" Both Carol and Krista calmly dished out the food and convinced their strong-willed daughters that if they wanted dessert, they'd better try some dinner.

As we began eating I looked around the table, enjoying the lively faces and conversation. Erin, Krista's four-year old daughter and Carol's daughter, Bonnie, sat on either side of me. Across the table was Camilla, Carol's sophisticated eleven-year-old and next to her sat Andrew, a nineteen-year-old university student who boards with the family. At either end of the table sat Carol and Krista. Carol's eyes hold a dark vitality that sparks to aliveness when she talks of ideas and issues that are important to her. On this particular night she was tired and her face seemed vulnerable; the strong lines of living and struggling seemed softened and tentative. Krista appears to have abundant energy. Right now that energy is focussed on

Family Map: Carol and Krista

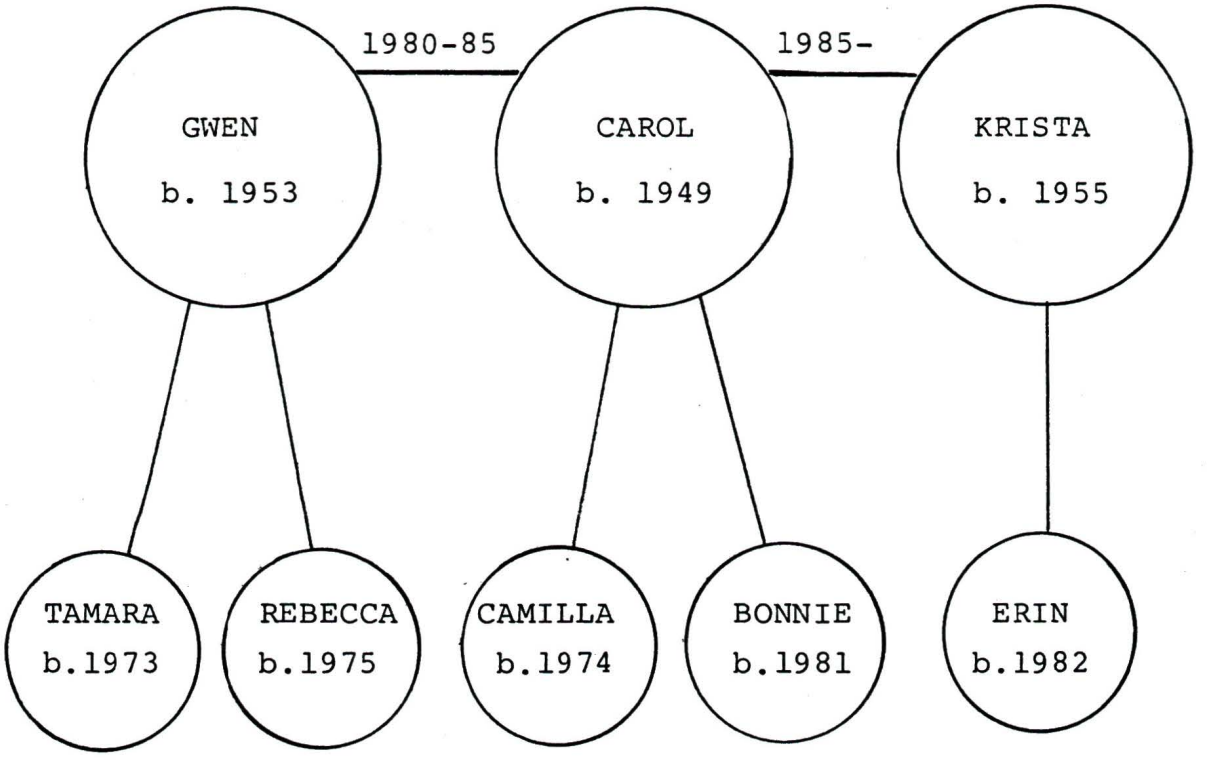

Figure 2

gardening, dancing and volunteer counselling and she brings to these activities a spirit of openness and playfulness. The lives of both women are reflected in their home; the piano and guitars, the fridge covered with photographs of the children and feminist cartoons, the comfort and clutter of interesting books, seaside treasures, children's drawings, plants and toys all speak of an active, well lived-in household.

Although the interview was with Krista and Carol, a third women, Gwen, was referred to throughout the interview and was a definite character in the story of their family. Gwen and her two daughters, Tamara and Rebecca, lived with Carol, Bonnie and Camilla for five years. Eight months ago Gwen, her boyfriend and her children had left Canada to live and study in the South Pacific. At this point, Krista, who was just leaving her marriage, moved into Pearl Street with her daughter. The interview focusses on the relationships between Krista and Carol and their children, but there is the constant awareness that much of Carol's experience of co-parenting is shaped by her five years of living with Gwen.

When Carol originally decided to live with Gwen and then later, decided to live with Krista, she didn't know either woman very well. However, in both cases there was a sense of "knowing" the other person and feeling comfortable with them:

> Carol: When I first met Gwen I thought, "God, I know this woman from somewhere and her children look so familiar to me." We immediately hit it off. She was just leaving her husband then and she moved into Pearl Street with her kids. A few months later I wrote to her and said, "If anyone's moving out let me know." When my letter arrived one of the people in the house thought, "I'd better move out because I think Carol and Gwen need to live together and have their children together." As I'm talking I realize we didn't really decide in a way--just as everything happened we decided to stay together. We didn't think we'd be together for five years.

Three weeks after Carol and Camilla, then aged five, moved in with Gwen and her daughters, Carol found out she was pregnant with Bonnie. She knew she was not going to be together with Bonnie's father, but Gwen was supportive of the new baby:

> Carol: When I told Gwen she said, "That's fine--let's do it." She already had her tubes tied, but was excited about me having another baby. It was like that was going to be her baby too. I just always felt strong support from Gwen... I've never thought of myself as a natural at mothering and she probably was more the natural in those ways. I have really learned a lot from her.

Gwen assisted the mid-wife at Bonnie's birth and ten minutes after Bonnie was born Tamara, Rebecca and Camilla were all woken up to look at and hold the new baby who'd just entered their lives.

It was four years later when Krista first met Gwen and Carol. At this point she was living on one of the Gulf Islands with her husband and daughter and was beginning to contemplate leaving her marriage. The shared parenting situation that Gwen and Carol had created looked attractive:

> Krista: When I met this household I immediately had a nice connection with both Carol and Gwen. I walked into the house and there was an instant kind of flash of recognition. It was a feeling of ease and a sense of "Oh, this is a family--I could feel part of this." A few months later I moved into Pearl Street when Gwen and the kids went travelling.

When Krista left her marriage, she was very clear that she did not want to live and parent on her own:

> Krista: I knew I wanted to be in a cooperative situation where there was shared parenting. I've seen other single parents living by themselves and I've seen the struggle they've had in taking on the burden by themselves. I didn't want to just forge out on my own and by a martyr--I need support as a parent. I've had to go through a lot to accept that. Sometimes I have felt that I had to be so strong and take it all on myself. I just have learned over the last few years that for me that's ridiculous--that it only leads to a lot of frustration and anger and resentment coming from me towards Erin and Erin picks it up and isn't happy.

Although Carol did not know Krista well, she sensed a commonality in their values and lifestyles and felt comfortable inviting her to move in to Pearl Street when Gwen and the girls left. Because Gwen had lived with Carol and her daughters for five years, the household needed some time to readjust to new people and faced many of the issues and dilemmas encountered by blended families. For Bonnie, the change "was especially hard because she doesn't have another parent and Gwen had always been her other parent. We always used to tell her that she was lucky because she had two moms." However, when "one of these moms left all of a sudden she wasn't quite ready to accept a new mom without a good trial." Krista remembers the first weeks

as being quite difficult as everyone readjusted to the new situation:

> Krista: There was an interesting transition moving to Pearl House where there was a whole family set up and I was moving into sort of take Gwen's place. There was a lot of testing with Bonnie and I the first month or so, She would say, "You can't tell me what to do, only my Mom can. You're not the boss."

Over a preiod of time the newness of the situation settled into familiarity and the new relationships began to take on their own meaning and vitality:

> Krista: It was a process of accepting--and me trying not to feel badly that I wasn't Gwen and accepting that I was who I was. I hoped Bonnie would eventually come around and I feel she has. We have a much better relationship now, and I really love her.

The children had sorting out to do between themselves too. All of a sudden, Bonnie, used to being the baby of the family, had a new, younger "sister" and Erin, accustomed to being an only child was the youngest of three. Camilla had a new role as well. When Gwen and her daughters had lived with the family, Tamara, aged twelve, had been the eldest and had often been the babysitter. Suddenly Camilla was the oldest child in the family and she was living with two four-year-olds who demanded considerable attention.

One of the things that helped the new household to settle and develop its own patterns and identity was the instigation of a house meeting. Shortly after Krista moved into Pearl Street, they decided to rent out an extra room to cut down the costs of their large house. Andrew,

a nineteen-year-old student moved in to the upstairs room. Both Krista and Carol recognized that the house had gone through major upheaval and liked the idea of having a meeting to clarify expectations and roles:

> Carol: I called the meeting because I thought with all the changes, Krista and Andrew might not feel like it was their house and they were probably wondering how things were done and that sort of thing.
>
> Krista: I wanted a meeting because I recognized that the house had really shifted--it was all new people except for Carol and the kids. Obviously the chemistry wasn't the same and it wasn't going to work in the same way. I know for myself living in a cooperative house it's kind of neat to have some things sorted out--some guidelines for cooking and cleaning and that sort of thing.

Out of the meeting came agreements and domestic schedules that gave some structure to organizing the household:

> Krista: There are certain things we've acknowledged and worked out. In the fall we set up a schedule for cooking... Carol and I each take two nights a week and Andrew takes one. One the weekends we go for whatever--Camilla sometimes cooks or we're out.
>
> Carol: We also scheduled the dishes and we each have our own chores to do. We decided to each take on a different part of the house and that would be our own responsibility.

For the most part, the schedules have worked well. There have been times when Andrew has seemed like "the bigger kid," rather than a full contributing adult, but they also recognize that "he is changing and becoming more mature," and has begun pulling his own weight in terms of household chores and responsibilities. A confrontation about dirty dishes also brought domestic issues into focus and provided an opportunity for talking about expression of feelings and resentments:

> Carol: For a while I felt that nobody was ever doing the dishes but me and I just exploded about it one night. Just as dinner was being put on the table I started blasting off about the dishes all over the counter and everybody was sort of paralyzed.

After dinner, Krista went up to Carol's bedroom and they discussed finding a way to talk about issues before they became serious:

> Krista: We agreed to try and talk about it as soon as someone was feeling on edge--before there was a big build up, because the build up is harder on everybody. It's probably the hardest on the person who's bugged because inside they're sort of eating themselves up.

Carol recognized that "somehow once you've aired things they feel a lot better," but also realized that it was something she found very difficult to do and that she often "edited" her feelings until they did reach an explosive state:

> Carol: I've always had a problem telling people when I'm upset. I often feel that I don't want to be unreasonable and don't want to interfere with people's lives. It's hard in a co-op situation sometimes when I feel that someone is doing something that infringes on my feelings or my life. It's hard for me to accept that "yes, I am angry, yes, I am upset." I tend to edit my feelings and think I shouldn't be like that--I should be able to accept people more and be more tolerant--and then it all does build up.

Both women also acknowledged that it was really important to stay constantly in touch with each other about the different aspects of their lives so that there was clarity about each other's motivations and moods:

> Carol: I'ts really important that the person you live with knows what's happening in your life. Otherwise if you're grouchy they might think, "What have I done?" while it might be that you just got your period or had a fight with your boyfriend. It could be anything, but if you don't talk about it, the other person tends to think it's something going on between the two of you.

They also recognized that "having another adult around is really helpful" in terms of getting clearer on their own feelings about relationships and issues in their lives:

> Carol: The kitchen is always a focus area right about five o'clock where we talk, talk, talk...
>
> Krista: We always get in a little interpersonal relating then.
>
> Carol: It's sort of the debriefing of the day. Often I don't discover the things that I've been feeling until I start talking about them. I might start by saying, "I went to see the doctor today, or I visited with a friend"--and then it comes out how I really felt. You don't necessarily do that if you don't have someone to talk to about it.

As well as valuing the personal support they get from the situation in terms of having someone to talk to about their thoughts and feelings, they also appreciate the freedom this situation allows them as parents. They agreed to each spend one night a week babysitting so the other person was free to go out or visit friends. When Gwen and Carol had lived together the situation had also provided holiday time alone for each of the mothers. At one point Gwen had gone to Borneo for a few weeks while Carol looked after all the children and then Carol went on a kayak trip and Gwen took charge. Some of the arrangements are specifically set

up and other things happen spontaneously in response to particular needs or situations:

> Krista: We're always in ongoing process, so if something doesn't feel good we try to say it. Say for example if Bonnie's up early and Erin hears her and gets up, then Carol will usually feed them both. Without organizing things they just sort of happen... Often we just freely do stuff--like Carol will say, "Let me take Erin out for a walk in the park."
>
> Carol: Or if I have a dinner date with an adult I'll say, "Can I leave the kids with you tonight?" It's just loose.
>
> Krista: And we go with what feels right.
>
> Carol: I think I also just watch what Krista is doing with Erin and don't take over, but try and support her.

There are also times when they need time with their own children and they've learned to express that need as well:

> Carol: Sometimes we feel like we just want to be with our own kids and that's OK too. We have the freedom to say, "No, tonight I don't really want to (babysit) because I just feel like I need to be with my own kids." You always take the other child into consideration, but there are times when you want to give your own child some focussed attention without a throng of people around.

The fact that Krista and Carol have similar values about parenting contributes to a sense of consistency with the children:

> Carol: It's important to have basically similar habits and similar ideas about raising children... Like when Erin's bugging Krista I will say, "Erin, I think you should be in your room for a while." And we both know that's OK.
>
> Krista: We allow each other to take on the discipline. We need the secondary support.

> Carol: If Krista says "no" to Erin and she continues to argue, then I'll back her up and say, "Listen the answer was NO!"
>
> Krista: Sometimes they believe it more from the other person--their own mother might just have told them for half an hour... they need to know that their mother's not the only person that is affected by their behavior.

It has also been very helpful to the mothers having the older children to help with babysitting:

> Krista: For me it has been great having Camilla because she really helps out a lot. She splits up fights between Bonnie and Erin and babysits when we both go out. It's ideal for me. Camilla is very mature and I feel totally trusting of her ability.
>
> Carol: And when Tamara was here she was eleven so it was usually great to take her along anywhere because she could look after the younger kids.

They also recognize that as the girls get older, it has been beneficial for them to have an adult to talk to other than their own mother:

> Carol: Camilla's not really an adult, but she's quite cognizant of things. When Camilla and I were having some trouble a while ago, she talked to Krista about it. She's at the age where she needs that--you don't always get along with your own Mom, so it helps to have someone else to talk to. It's a certain age I think when extra role models help.

The presence of extra adults in the children's lives is something that both Krista and Carol believe is valuable and healthy for their children. It is something neither of them had in their own upbringing:

> Krista: In my family I was the only girl and my parents were never really very happy together. I felt so alone--never having an older person I could talk to. There were adults I knew and was

> drawn to--like my aunt was one--but it never seemed that there was any access to go to her and say, "I'm really unhappy, can I come stay with you tonight?" I remember walking down the street and thinking there was no house where I was welcomed or could be a part of a family. It's always been in me that I want to provide that for my children--I want Erin to feel there are other people she can go to besides me because I can't be the only one... If it was just Erin and I living together, she would be constantly in need of input from me--and me only. Now she gets it from me and she gets it from Carol and Bonnie and Camilla and Andrew. It's more spread out. I've always believed that children need that kind of diverse family.
>
> Carol: I think an open family offers that to the kids--they feel like they belong. They don't just belong to their mother--they belong in the world. Growing up in a nuclear family I always knew I had to deal with all the stuff in my parents' relationship. My parents were always so worried that "these are my children and everything they do reflects on me!" It was such a relief if there was even one more adult around.

At Pearl Street there are often many adults around and the sense of family extends beyond just the people that are living in the house:

> Carol: We have a very extended family. There are various people that used to live in the house and there are sort of half families like Camilla's Dad and all of that family. And then there's Jim, my boyfriend, and his family. I mean we haven't signed any papers or anything, but that sense of family is very real to us. It's people you can count on and know are going to be there. When you're making plans for Christmas you see who's going to be there and you expect to be with a lot of people you care about.

Carol's children have always been raised in co-operative parenting situations and have always experienced many adults as part of their life. One of the advantages she sees in raising children this way is that they have a strong sense of themselves:

> Carol: In a co-op house there is more of a feeling that each person is an individual. I think the children get that sense too--it's not just a Mom and a Dad in their life, but they see that everyone is different... I think they have learned to take responsibility for themselves--because they're out there relating to all kinds of other people. Some people like you and some people don't. It's not a situation where if someone doesn't like you, your whole self-image bottoms out.

Recently, five-year-old Bonnie has shown her ability to take responsibility for herself by reaching out to a friend, a man who has been part of the "extended family" since her birth, and asking him to be her "Dad." She had been feeling upset by the fact that the other kids had fathers and she didn't, so she phoned Bob at work, had his secretary tell him to phone her back and she set up a date to talk to him about being her Dad. They sat down and negotiated what that would mean and agreed that Bonnie could phone Bob when she wanted, have dinners with him sometimes and call him "Dad." Krista notices Bonnie is feeling quite loved right now:

> Krista: Bonnie doesn't have a father who acknowledges her and there's been a lot of emotional stuff around that for her lately. I said to her, "You know you have a bunch of Moms now Bonnie," and she said, "Yeah, I've got my Mom and Gwen and you." And then she talked about this new Dad--an old friend of the family's she's asked to be her Dad. He's been around and giving her lots of input. And then she has all these sisters. I think she's feeling quite abundant in what she has right now.

Right now the future is uncertain for the family at Pearl Street. Erin will soon be going to live with her

father for a few months and Gwen and her daughters will be returning from Asia and may want to live at Pearl Street again. Although Krista and Carol do not see that they have a future together raising their children, both are quite clear that they don't want to parent on their own or in a nuclear family situation:

> Krista: I don't think the nuclear family really works anyway. Even two people can't really give the child enough. The old extended family with aunts and uncles and grandparents seems supportive and healthy. That old way of having family seems to be kind of what this whole new way of cooperative living is trying to find--more of a support group. Having children is a big responsibility.
>
> Carol: I think the nuclear family is a relatively recent invention--almost a consumer entity; if you have more individual families they have to consume more stuff. I think it was sort of an experiment that didn't work. The old extended family was obviously a better set-up--especially for women--because there were more people around to share the home and work.

Although both women have boyfriends their preference is to continue living with other women:

> Krista: I don't necessarily cut out the possibility of living with a man sometime, although at this point in my life if I did live in connection with a man it would probably still be within a cooperative situation. I'm not that interested in living with a man right now. I am really enjoying living with another woman--it's really important to me.
>
> Carol: I think with another woman you're always more willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Gwen and I went through some stuff when her boyfriend moved in here. But because she was a woman I could understand her falling in love and blasting through and having him move in because it's that intense emotion that I can understand--even though it was hard on me I have compassion for it. We always recognize our bond again--that giggly feeling of being back with my sister. There is that common understanding because you're both women.

The choice to live cooperatively does not seem like just a temporary or transitional phase in their lives, but rather a continuing way of life that they see extending into their old age:

> Krista: When I grow old I want to maintain this sense of family.
>
> Carol: I used to do homemaking for this old couple who had all these pictures around of their family, yet they were so alone. They were very sick and unhappy. I don't think that I will ever live alone or even with one other person. I don't feel happy in that situation--there's too much there--it's too heavy or something. I picture myself as an old person living with about eight people--maybe some old and some not. I flashed on this idea of an old mansion again--with lots of people. That's really what I envision for my old age.

Sarah and Judith

I arrived at Sarah and Judith's house just as the three older boys were leaving for school. Both mothers stood on the back porch in their dressing gowns waving goodbyes and calling last minute reminders to their sons as they rushed off to the bus. Josh, Judith's four-year-old was not pleased about all his playmates leaving for the day, but as we sat down to talk, he trundled off to tease the dog and play on his own. Although I had not met Judith and Sarah before and had only talked to them on the phone, they were both warm and approachable and I was quickly settled comfortably into their big, sunny kitchen enjoying the strong coffee and their lively banter and humour.

Sarah and Judith met in Vancouver twelve years ago when Sarah was giving birth to her first son, Luke. Judith was the apprentice mid-wife at the birth and a few years later, after both women had moved to the Kootenays, she also was present for the birth of Sarah's second son, Jeremy. For a short while the two women worked together and Sarah assisted Judith at births. Then, as each began "doing different things in different parts of the Kootenays," they lost touch for four or five years. Last summer they ran into each other at a music festival in Vancouver, renewed contact and realized that both were considering

Family Map: Sarah and Judith

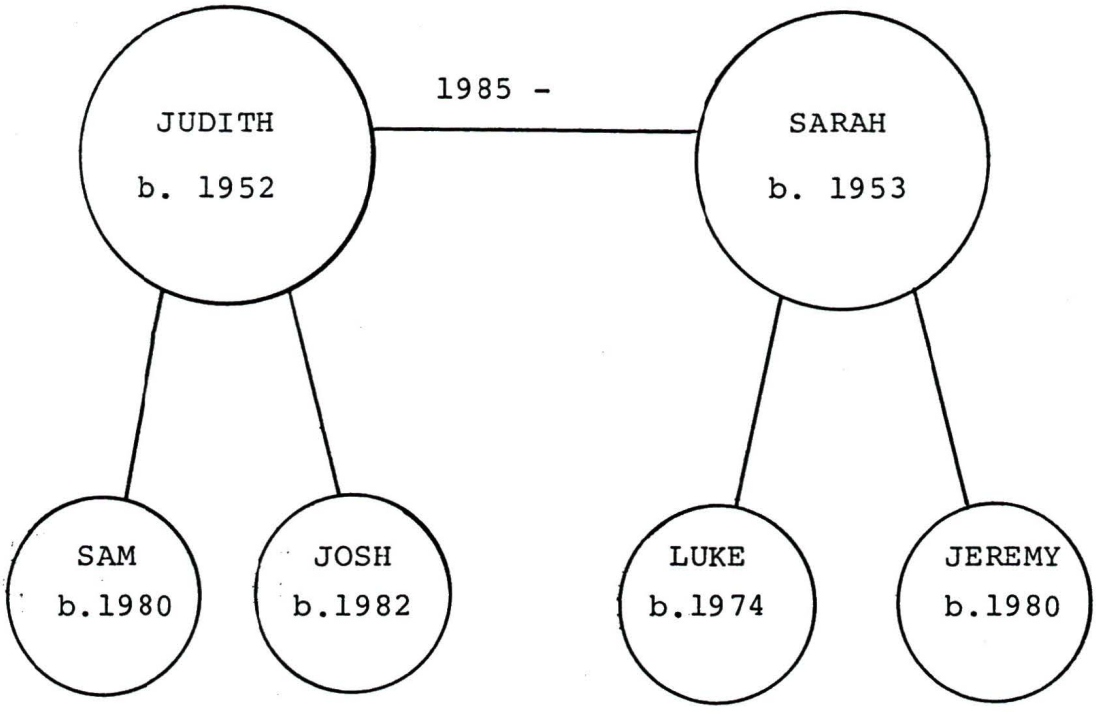

Figure 3

moving to the city with their two sons. After returning to the Kootenays to pack and organize, Sarah decided to approach Judith about the idea of "getting a house together." For both women a shared situation offered support they needed:

> Sarah: I really wasn't keen on moving back to the big city--I'd been away from it for ten years. I didn't like the idea of moving back and being alone with my two kids. I've been single for six years, but in the Kootenays I always had a really good support network around me.
>
> Judith: I hadn't been a single mom--although I had been in the past with my daughter who's fourteen now and lives with her Dad. For the past eight and a half years I'd been in a nuclear family and that changed this summer and brought with it a move to the city. With the kind of work I do as a mid-wife, I need a situation where I can leave in the middle of the night and know that the person who is there can take care of the kids in the morning and get them to daycare and do whatever needs to be done. This is certainly a situation that allows this kind of work to take place--without it, it wouldn't work at all.

Despite the fact that Sarah and Judith had been out of touch for a number of years, there was a trust in each other that was based on their work together:

> Sarah: Judith was at both my births and having done work together we knew it was possible to work together in this situation... working in a clinical situation like that there are pretty intense moments and you really get to know somebody when you work that intensely with them. There's some emergency and you have to deal with it--and it just goes, it just moves. There's that same sort of intensity involved with parenting and that brings up trust. Having worked with you in those situations, I know that I trust you--I trust you to do whatever needs to be done.

Judith nodded in affirmation as Sarah talked of the trust and pondered whether there were other factors that had attracted her to the situation:

> Judith: I'm trying to think if there's something other than that trust that was important...
>
> Sarah: Well I thought you had money...
>
> Judith: And I knew we laughed at the same jokes.

So, knowing that they worked and laughed well together, they agreed to try finding a house that they could share. The house they are living in is the first place they looked at together and they attribute "part of the success of how (they've) worked together to the actual lay-out of the house." It is a big, renovated house in a quiet neighbourhood of the city. A huge downstairs area provides bedrooms, play space and a bathroom for the boys, and the upstairs is divided into two private spaces with one bedroom and bathroom off the kitchen and another off the living room. The spaciousness allows both women to have their own privacy and the big downstairs helps divide the "rowdy" play area from the quieter parts of the house.

The move into the house was a big change for everybody. Both the children and the mothers were adjusting to living in the city and Judith and her sons were also in the process of adjusting to a family situation without the children's father:

> Sarah: The first couple of months were pretty hairy around here. Both of us were going through incredible changes.

> Judith: For me it was the break-up that was most stressful... just dealing with that and adjusting and existing.

Although none of the children knew each other very well before they moved in together, the mothers have both been impressed with how well they adjusted to the new situation. Sarah attributes some of the smoothness of the transition to the fact that her children have always had "other adults in their life that they respect and have really good relationships with." Although Sarah lived on her own with her children, she was a part of a cooperative in the Kootenays, and "there were always a lot of kids around and a lot of other adults who were assuming parenting roles... I've always had a lot of support from my friends in parenting and there are several people who my kids have always seen as extra mothers and fathers." Judith's children were part of a more traditional family set-up, but in the rural area where they lived, there were always many other children around for them to play with. The fact that "none of the kids has ever lived in isolation from their peers," and that they are "very sensitive and caring people," has eased their adjustment to the new city and new family situation:

> Judith: I think this transition has been really positive for them. They've all done amazingly well.
>
> Sarah: They didn't really know each other before, but the other day Josh talked about his brothers--mentioning something about Luke and Jeremy being his brothers.

In terms of parenting, each woman takes responsibility primarily for their own children, but there is also a good deal of overlap:

> Judith: We're mainly responsible for our own kids, but certainly a lot of chores that are common to both are done by either and as far as doing domestic things like cooking meals--we only end up doing that half the time we would if we lived alone.
>
> Sarah: And when Judith sees a need for something to happen then she can deal with that in the way that's best for her and when I see a need to deal with something, it's free enough so I can deal with it in my own way. Usually I discipline my kids and Judith disciplines hers, but if I see something odd going on I feel comfortable dealing with her kids and I think she feels comfortable as well.

Similarity in values about parenting has been important in helping them be consistent with the children:

> Sarah: Neither of us are real hitters.
>
> Judith: We both use the great outdoors a lot and send them outside--It's an old Kootenay trick. Send them out in the snow.
>
> Sarah: It's a lot more effective when it's really cold. I guess as parents we're not too different at all actually.

For the most part they try and let the four boys work out dilemmas between themselves:

> Sarah: Often what happens is that the four of them need to sit down and work something out between themselves.
>
> Judith: Mostly we just encourage them to work things out--like, "if there's bloodshed let us know," but otherwise they deal with stuff on their own. But then there are days when it's just beyond them.

Both women admit that living with four young boys "does get outrageous sometimes." Occasionally "one of them will come tearing up the stairs with the other three behind... and the whole thing just explodes. That's when Judith and I both want to leave!" When chaotic situations occur, sometimes the mothers will each spend some time with their own children:

> Judith: Occasionally one technique I've used is literally grabbing my two and guiding them into my room, closing the door and just talking or being with them for awhile. Or, putting them in the bathtub--hydrotherapy. Sometimes it's just saying, "OK, nobody's doing anything wrong--what you need now is time alone and time quiet for awhile." If you try to pick out who's being wrong, it doesn't work--you just get somebody feeling like they've been wrong.
>
> Sarah: Sometimes I'll just sit down with my kids and try and get a coherent story--often that's all it needs. They each need a chance to say what happened and feel listened to and then it's over.

One of the things that is valuable about sharing parenting is just having the other person's feedback on what is occurring:

> Judith: It's good to have somebody that goes through the hours and the days with the kids and knows them and can offer input.
>
> Sarah: There also seems to be a lot of validating going on--"Yes, Judith, Josh is trying to drive you crazy; it's not your imagination. He's being a real shit! What you did was fine--it's OK that you threw him out."
>
> Judith: It's feedback.
>
> Sarah: Someone there to validate what you're doing--"Yes, I saw that."

Most of the domestic scheduling and decisions have just evolved as they've lived together and found the best ways to work things out. Before they moved in together, they did talk about "the kids and how they'd be together," and they tentatively set up a plan for cooking on alternate nights and shopping on alternate weeks:

> Sarah: We schedule things loosely... we talk in the morning.
>
> Judith: And say, "Well, what does you day look like?" and go from there.
>
> Sarah: We will usually cook on alternate nights unless one of us has something on and then we'll trade or order pizza or work around it somehow... The shopping we finally got together and we do it on alternate weeks.

Athough there are no schedules for housework, it is shared pretty equally and both women appreciate "knowing that we don't cook every dinner and we don't wash every dish and we don't always have to vacuum!" Again, having similar standards has been helpful:

> Sarah: In that respect the house has fallen together really well. Neither of us are really sticklers for cleaning--but stuff always seems to get done. Cleaning just sort of happens. Some mornings I get up and need to clean and other mornings Judith gets up and she does it.
>
> Judith: I think we take cues from each other too, in that regard. It's called guilt!... And there is a basic trust that the other person's absolutely going to do their share.

As well as appreciating the domestic and parenting support, they also find it valuable to be living with a friend that they can talk to about all the various things happening in their lives:

> Sarah: It seems about eleven o'clock at night after the kids have been in bed for awhile and both of us have had time by ourselves doing our own stuff, we come together here at the table and have check-in time and just get hysterical time. Sometimes that means laughing hysterically and other times it has meant just crying.
>
> Judith: There are fathers involved in both of these situations, so sometimes our subject matter is fathers--as one might guess. In both our situations, but perhaps more freshly in mine because the split-up is so recent, there is a lot of emotional stuff that comes up. It's very useful that the other person's here--kind of sitting beside--but objectively and supportively.

Sarah also values the luxury of being able to indulge her moods and know that there is someone else there to cope with the children:

> Sarah: It's not that things aren't working here in the house, it's just me going through, "What am I doing anyway? The world isn't working!" In those times it's been really nice to have someone here to listen to me. And in times when I've had to lock myself in my room and cry hysterically, it's been great to know that Judith is here and she'll feed the kids and I don't have to worry about that... When I was living alone I would go through my little freak-outs, but still while I was trying to be really depressed I would be guilty about the kids and not making supper.
>
> Judith: Now you can just feel thoroughly depressed with no guilt attached.
>
> Sarah: And I get through it in half the time.
>
> Judith: A good time saving device!

The other thing that both women find important about their living situation, and quite different from their previous nuclear families, is the freedom it allows them:

> Judith: I find I get a lot more free time here--a lot more time of my own to do things that I want to do without having to answer to Sarah--without feeling, and it is just my feeling--that I'm not living up to something or somebody's expectations. I have all of that with Sarah in a sense because I do want things to be balanced--but it doesn't have the same charge that it began to have for me in the nuclear family... With Sarah I can remain clear and I don't take on expectations the way I always did in other relationships.
>
> Sarah: There's a basic understanding that part of living together is to have that freedom. Sometimes I'm working on some taping and I need to leave here in the early afternoon and I'm not back until two in the morning and that's fine. In any other situation I wouldn't be able to do that. I don't get that kind of support from my ex-husband, but I do from Judith.

At the moment, neither woman is involved in a relationship. Sarah would like to be, but doesn't see herself choosing to live with a partner:

> Sarah: At this point in my life, I would really like an intimate relationship, but I would prefer that my lover lived elsewhere... I've been a single parent for a long time and I have become really used to not having all those expectations every minute of the day--and I really quite like it. I really miss not having an intimate relationship with somebody, but at this point I wouldn't want to live with a lover.

Judith, on the other hand, feels "inspired" by this situation and it gives her hope that maybe families can work after all:

> Judith: I'm not sure where I'm at with that (living with a man) right now. This is absolutely right for now and it's absolutely a source of inspiration... that two people can do it. But it makes me wonder why having a close relationship with a man should be a reason not to be able to do it... I think this situation has given me a reminder--because I have done this once before. Years ago I lived with a woman friend and her daughter

> and my daughter for about a year and a half--and that worked out really well too. This is reminding me of how life can work, how a family can work--and for me it opens up the possibility of it happening within a male-female relationship.

The future is something Judith and Sarah haven't discussed, but no change is foreseen in the near future:

> Sarah: Well, we haven't really talked about the future--but, I don't want to move.
>
> Judith: And I don't want to move either.
>
> Sarah: So there you go. I would like to stay in this situation until I leave Vancouver, which is at least a couple of years from now.

As they talked about the future, it seemed rather far off and inconsequential. In the present moment, the dog needed feeding, Josh wanted attention and Sarah needed to get to the airport to pick up her Mom who was arriving from Calgary to stay with the family for a few days. "I can hardly wait for her to get here," Sarah said as she rushed off, "the mothers around here could use a little mothering."

Chapter 5

General Structure of Single Mothers Experience of Co-Parenting

Van Manen (1984) describes themes as being like "knots in the webs of our experiences around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus experienced as meaningful wholes" (p. 29). The following section explores the themes or "knots" that emerged from examination of the responses of the group as a whole. The major themes and variations that are identified give a sense of the core issues and concerns that structure single mothers experience of co-parenting. Themes are grouped according to the four areas addressed in the questioning: (a) History of the household, (b) Parenting and domestic arrangements, (c) Relationship between the women, and (d) the Future.

History of the Household

1. Participants chose their co-parenting partner because they trusted them. Trust was based on shared history or an intuitive sense of commonality. Bronwyn and Jennifer had known each other for four years before they started living together and both mentioned their confidence and trust in the other person. Similarly, Judith and Sarah had known each other for twelve years and even though they had been out of touch for part of

that time, their experience working together allowed them to trust that living and parenting together would be successful. Although Carol and Krista did not know each other well, they had friends in common and felt a sense of familiarity and commonality with the other person. The experience of sharing a birth together was one trust building event. In all three families there was mention of sharing the births of their children. Bronwyn was a labour coach at Jennifer's birth. Judith helped deliver both of Sarah's sons and Carol mentioned that Gwen, her previous co-parenting partner had assisted the mid-wife at her birth. It seemed that sharing this experience had been a bonding event for all of these women.

2. Participants chose to co-parent because they wanted support. Judith specifically wanted support because her work as a mid-wife demanded the presence of another person for nights when she got called out. Sarah "was not keen on moving back to the city and being on her own with two kids" and was used to a supportive community of friends that helped her with parenting. Krista was just leaving a marriage and knew that she didn't want to live alone with her daughter: "I need support as a parent... leaving a marriage I knew that I wanted a supportive situation--I never even once thought of living on my own." Carol expressed similar need for support when she initially started parenting with Gwen: "Gwen understood the ins and

outs of raising children... that was really good for me because I needed somebody." Although Bronwyn had parented on her own for several years, she found being a student and a single mother demanding and lonely at times and Jennifer, similarly, had enjoyed a few months on her own with Emma, but found she wanted the "mutual support and company" a shared situation offered.

3. Transition to the new situation was stressful and the families found differing ways of dealing with the changes. Bronwyn and Jennifer recognized that the new situation was going to take adapting to and agreed to giving themselves a six-week grace period where they would try to adjust without getting too upset. Before they moved in together they also talked about guide-lines and expectations of the situation. Judith and Sarah also talked about their situation before they started living together, although initially most of their concerns were "about the kids and how they would be together." The transition phase was difficult for everyone because they were not only adjusting to each other, but also to living in the city and for Judith there was the adjustment of being freshly out of an eight year marriage. Carol and Krista recognized that their household was in the midst of a major shift because Gwen and her children had just left after sharing with Carol for five years. They chose to call a house meeting to discuss expectations, money

and housework schedules so that Krista and Andrew, a student boarding with them, would have a sense of belonging in the home.

Parenting and Domestic Arrangements

1. Primary responsibility is for own children, but there is also overlap in childcare. Judith and Sarah see themselves as being mainly responsible for their own sons, but they also "feel free to deal with things in (their) own way" in terms of disciplining the other woman's children. Bronwyn and Jennifer get their own daughters ready in the morning and are primarily responsible for their own child, but they also let "whoever is around take care of the situation." They also agreed that the natural parent would not interfere with the interactions between her child and the other mother. Similarly, Krista and Carol mainly look after their own daughters, but "always take the other child into consideration" and are constantly in "ongoing process" in terms of shifting and sharing parenting.

2. Participants found it valuabel to have another adult available to offer validation and support in parenting. Sarah and Judith find it helpful just to have each other notice what is going on and acknowledge that their parenting actions are justified: "Yes, I saw that--what you did was

just fine." Krista refers to it as "secondary support," someone there to back up the parenting decisions and let the children know that their "mother isn't the only one who feels that way." Jennifer emphasizes the importance of having a "united front" for the children and how important it is to her to "just have someone there to acknowledge" what she is going through.

3. Some participants found it important to spend some time with just their own children. Carol expressed need to give her own children particular attention sometimes and said that both she and Krista felt free to ask for time alone with their own children. Judith and Sarah occasionally take their own sons asied into their bedroom and talk and spend time with them alone.

4. Some participants believe it is important for their children to have relationships with other adults beside their own parents. Sarah, Krista and Carol mentioned wanting to provide family situations where their children had "input from lots of adults." They believed it was important for their children to have different "role-models" and people besides their parents that they could feel safe being with and talking to.

5. It was felt by some participants that they had learned from the other mother's parenting style. Bronwyn described herself as not being "a nurturing parent" in

the same way Jennifer was and says that she has learned to soften and be more flexible; Jennifer has appreciated learning from Bronwyn's consistency and solid sense of limits. Carol mentioned not seeing herself as "a natural" at mothering and believed that she had "learned a lot" from Gwen's experience and parenting style.

6. Similar values in parenting give consistency to the families. Bronwyn mentioned that she never needs to "worry what Jennifer is going to do to Aubrie or Emma for that matter--it isn't stressful that way. There's just very conscientious parenting on both sides." Carol believes that it is really important that co-parents "have basically similar habits and similar ideas about raising children." She describes a time when a third mother and her daughter lived with her and Gwen: "She had a really different attitude towards her child--it was always laissez faire and eventually we had to ask her to move out." Judith and Sarah see themselves as "being not that different at all as parents" and affirm that neither of them are "real hitters" and both choose to let the boys work problems out between themselves.

7. Participants appreciate the freedom the co-parenting situation allows them. Krista and Carol organized that each of them would have one night out a week when the other person would babysit and in the previous situation between Carol and Gwen they had taken turns looking after the children

and allowing the other person to have holidays alone. Similarly, Jennifer went to Hawaii on holiday while Bronwyn stayed working for a month in the Northwest Territories while Jennifer moved the family to the coast and looked after both children. Bronwyn describes the difference between living alone as a single parent and living with Jennifer: "I didn't have time for anything else--no social life. Now I just play and play and play and Jennifer stays home with the kids!" Judith and Sarah also appreciate the "free time" they have to do their own things--a freedom they didn't feel in their marriages.

8. Organization of housework varied from family to family. Krista and Carol's household was the most structured in terms of scheduling domestic duties. The two mothers and the boarding student agreed to be responsible for cleaning different parts of the house and dishes and cooking nights were arranged so each person knew when it was their turn to do a task. Judith and Sarah "loosely" agreed to cooking on alternate nights and shopping on alternate weeks and household cleaning was done when it needed doing by both women. Bronwyn and Jennifer worked schedules around their own personal needs. Usually Bronwyn cooked during the week and Jennifer cooked on the weekends and Jennifer tended to do breakfasts so that Bronwyn could sleep in; they believed that there was a lot of "mutual respect" in terms of sharing in housework.

The Relationship Between the Women

1. Some participants believed it was important to express resentments and personal issues, but it was also found to be difficult. Carol and Krista agreed to try and "talk about it as soon as someone was feeling on edge about something," but both agreed it was hard to do. Carol described her tendency to "edit" her feelings, not wanting to seem "unreasonable" or "intolerant." Similarly, Jennifer recognized that her role as "nurturer" often got in the way of her being able to express her feelings and set limits.

2. Participants valued having the other person there to talk to about the personal and emotional events in their lives. Each pair of women mentioned specific times, dinner time or evening, when they would get together just to talk about their day and their feelings. Carol said that the process of talking allowed her to get clear on how she really felt about things and Bronwyn describes "talking a lot about things we were trying to work through... our relationships, our vulnerabilities and insecurities." For Judith and Sarah a good deal of their discussion is to do with the "fathers," and Judith acknowledged the importance of having another person there "sort of sitting beside--but objectively and supportively."

3. Participants' intimate relationships outside the family sometimes added stress to the situation. From Carol's six years of co-parenting experience, she drew the conclusion that the family works best when the mothers' outside relationships are on a balance--either both women are involved or neither are. She experienced tension in her previous co-parenting situation when Gwen fell in love and wanted her boyfriend to join the family. Jennifer felt her own aloneness more keenly when Bronwyn became involved in a relationship and the constant turmoil of Bronwyn's love affair began to interfere with the life of the family.

4. A co-parenting situation is seen as quite different from a nuclear family. Jennifer remembered her experience in her own family and then in her marriage as having a "power structure--a head and a follower." She sees her situation with Bronwyn as being much more "equal and respectful." They also believe that "there isn't the same kind of loading of issues that there would be with a lover." Similarly, Judith sees herself as being more autonomous and independent in this situation and she realizes that she doesn't try and live up to expectations, and they "don't have the same charge," that they did in her marriage. Neither Carol or Krista were very happy in the nuclear family they grew up in. They see the "openness" of their present family as being healthy for them and their children.

The Future

1. Participants expressed ambivalence about living with a partner in a nuclear family in the future. Carol and Sarah were fairly clear that they wanted relationships and romance, but that they wanted to maintain a cooperative family situation. The other four women were more uncertain. Bronwyn's lover has approached her about living together, but Bronwyn is apprehensive about leaving the security and "solid home base" she feels with Jennifer. Judith feels that her situation with Sarah is "absolutely right for now and absolutely an inspiration," but also hopes that it is possible for a family to work in the context of a marriage. Jennifer and Krista expressed some uncertainty about future living relationships with men, but there seemed to be an openness to "trying again" if the right kind of circumstances presented themselves.

2. Future of the families is uncertain and uncommitted. None of the three families had a very clear picture of what their future would look like. Bronwyn and Jennifer were waiting to find out if Jennifer was going to be moving to Eastern Canada for four months and Krista's daughter was going to be living with her father for six months, thus altering Krista's situation quite dramatically. Judith and Sarah considered it very possible that they would stay together for two or three years, but the future wasn't something that they had discussed or speculated on. It

seemed that the women in the co-parenting situations were committed to each other for as long as their shared situation lasted, but there was not a sense of commitment to necessarily staying together if other jobs, intimate relationships or life circumstances drew them in other directions.

Summary of Findings

The participants of this study chose co-parenting situations because they felt that they wanted personal and parenting support. They chose women to co-parent with that they trusted and that trust was often based on shared histories and experiences. Initial transitions to their shared households were often remembered as being stressful and the three families found varying ways of adapting to their new situations.

Participants valued the support and validation offered by their co-parenting partner. In all three situations, the women described themseves as being primarily responsible for their own children, but also being very involved in parenting the other women's children. Similar values in parenting were perceived as being very important to the stability and consistency within the families. Some of the mothers believed that it is important that their children know and trust adults other than their parents; they have consciously created living situations that provide extra role models and support for their children.

The women interviewed in this study appreciated the emotional support they received in their co-parenting situation. Some of the women struggled with finding ways to express their feelings honestly and constructively, but all valued having another adult to talk to about their daily lives and concerns. Participants' relationships outside the co-parenting situation were sometimes sources of tension in the family.

The future of these three families was uncertain. Although all of the participants were content with their present living arrangements, some of them could also envision living again in a nuclear family situation. At this stage and time in their lives, the women in this study saw their choice to co-parent as positive and satisfying.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

This chapter discusses the limitations in generalizing from these results, compares findings with the expectations stated in Chapter 3 and explores implications for counsellors and future research.

Generalizations

The six participants involved in this study were caucasian women, ranging in age from 29 to 37. All of the participants live on the Canadian west coast. Since the experiences, attitudes and insights described in this study are a reflection of these particular six women, readers should not consider the experiences of these women to be representative of all single mothers co-parenting.

Findings Related to Assumptions and Expectations

Many of my assumptions about the experiences of single mothers co-parenting were validated by the women I interviewed. However, there were also some notable exceptions. I was surprised by the minimal mention of financial considerations. From the review of literature and my discussions with single mothers prior to this study, I had assumed that "the choice to co-parent often arises out of practical and financial needs." Among the women

I interviewed, money did not seem to be a significant factor in their reasons for choosing their situation. Bronwyn and Jennifer mentioned thinking that they would save money, but realizing, once they've chosen their house that it was not going to be a saving. Carol acknowledges that they have a student boarder living with them because they "are both poor." But other than those two statements, very little attention is given to financial matters. This may be partially due to my questioning; I did not directly ask about money, but I had expected that the topic might arise from the questions about their reasons for choosing the situation and details about how they organized the household. It may also be possible that this is a sensitive subject that participants were not willing to discuss with me. Another possibility is that the participants of this study did not consider financial matters to be a significant factor in their decision to live together.

I was also startled that all of the participants described the parenting arrangements as being quite satisfactory and comfortable. I had assumed that "conflicts would arise out of differences in values and styles of parenting." Again, there is a possibility that there were tensions and differences between the mothers that they were unwilling to talk about. It seems likely that if they hadn't openly acknowledged their judgements or concerns with each other, that they would not want to bring up sensitive issues with me. However, my hunch is that if

there are radical differences in parenting styles, the household does not last very long. Carol described a situation where a mother was asked to leave their household because her approach to parenting was very different and uncomfortable to live with. Similarly, discussion I have had with mothers who have left co-parenting situations have suggested that differences in parenting values have created tensions that led to the disintegration of the shared situations. It appeared that the participants in this study had complementary styles of parenting and similar values about raising children.

In accordance with my expectations, the women in this study did find it emotionally supportive to have another adult to share parenting with. Emotional support also extended beyond parenting issues, to provide comfort and clarity to the various dimensions of the women's lives. Having someone to talk to about their work, relationships, family and whatever other issues shaped their days, was considered valuable by all the participants.

The participants also confirmed my assumptions that the women's outside relationships could cause tensions in the household and that commitment to a future together would be undefined and vague. While a nuclear family, at least in ideals, expects the parents to have their primary, intimate relationship with each other and to have a commitment to raising children together, a

cooperative parenting situation does not carry these expectations. At times the women in this study found their co-parenting partner's lover intrusive in their family and most of the women had not talked very conretely about their future, but rather seemed interested in staying in the situation for as long as it was convenient and satisfying.

My final assumption that "co-parenting can be a creative and nurturing lifestyle choice" seemed to be true for the women I interviewed. They still experienced many of the tensions found in any close living situation, but they saw the rewards of having a supportive living companion as being nurturing and rewarding. I also believe that these women have been creative in developing a living situation that allows them freedom that is not possible for most single parents. Their struggles in finding ways to run their households, communicate honestly and deal with each others' children show willingness to be flexible and experimental in creating forms of family that fulfill their needs.

Implications of Results for Counsellors

One of the aims of this study was to provide counsellors with a deeper understanding of the issues and dynamics that shape the lives of women in alternative family structures. Just recognizing the existence of

alternative families is a starting point. Bequaert (1976) mentions that many helping professionals are "bewildered by the pace and direction of social change" (p. 136); she argues convincingly that most family counsellors have a pronounced bias for "normal family patterns" and are likely to equate alternatives with pathology and failure (p. 137). To provide therapeutic help that is effective and just, counsellors need to develop helping strategies and theories that understand and respect a diversity of family forms.

This study provides portraits of the lives and experiences of six single mothers who have chosen a non-traditional form of parenting. Many of the issues and problems that develop among co-parenting mothers are similar to those found in any relationship or nuclear family. Although alternative families are not blood-kin to one another, in sharing a home they live intimately and develop their own unique patterning of roles, rules, problems and bonds. It is conceivable that any of the complex sets of relationships and communication patterns that would arise in co-parenting situations could benefit from professional help. However, the complexities, ambiguities and blurred roles that are inherent in alternative family arrangements challenge counsellors to examine their own assumptions and values about families and therapy.

A counsellor who chooses to work with single mothers who are co-parenting needs to demonstrate empathy and respect for lifestyle choices that differ from the traditional nuclear family. S/he must recognize that women are creating family forms that have few role models and consequently, some of the struggle they experience involves articulating expectations of each other and negotiating what guidelines they want to live by. Two of the women interviewed in this study discussed their difficulty in expressing their needs and feelings. A skilled counsellor could coach co-parenting partners in exploring direct, non-threatening ways of talking about emotional issues and needs and help the women to clarify their priorities in terms of their relationship and household. The tensions that arise around outside relationships could probably be diffused by having a counsellor facilitate clear expression of each of the women's needs. For instance, in one of the families in this tudy, the romantic involvement of one woman meant that the other woman felt quite isolated. Negotiating specific times that the two women could devote to each other and discussing how much time is appropriate or comfortable for a lover to be with the family, could clarify the situation and open channels to further talking and negotiating. The household meeting, established in one of the families in this study, could be encouraged as an option for co-parenting households and it is possible

that a counsellor could be used to facilitate a meeting if family members were stuck or needed support in working out difficult issues. If the six women in this study are indicative of those pioneering new family forms, counsellors will be challenged to be as innovative and dynamic as the families they seek to help.

Implications for Further Research

This investigation has provided glimpses of the experiences of three co-parenting families. It only provides the perspectives of these six women at the particular moment of the interview and the rich details of the life stories inspire myriads of possible topics for future research. A number of research alternatives based on the foundations of this study are suggested below:

1. to focus on the subjective experiences of the children in alternative families by interviewing and observing them;

2. to explore the development of a co-parenting family over time by doing a longitudinal study with a series of interviews over several months or years;

3. to expand on current understanding of support systems by focussing on the specifics of what single parents find to be helpful and supportive;

4. to compare platonic co-parenting situations with the experiences of lesbian mothers;

5. to interview alternative families where men are co-parenting together, or focussing on situations where men and women in platonic relationships are sharing parenting; (I did hear of one of each of these situations when I was looking for participants.)

6. to explore the use of household meetings as a way of making decisions and clarifying feelings and expectations;

7. to expand understanding of the dynamics of co-parenting families by interviewing women who have left a cooperative household. Issues that may have precipitated the separation could be explored and the relationships between the children and adults after they have left the household could also be addressed.

In general, further research is needed to examine the experiences of adults and children in alternative family structures. Virginia Satir (1972) predicts that "if the next fifty years just equal the changes of the last fifty years, then by the year 2020, the family could look quite different" (p. 303). Research that chronicles and describes the struggling experiments to pattern new family forms, will offer insight into the changing structure of our society.

Value of the Study

> The small sample not randomly chosen makes generalizations suspect. The anecdotal presentation raises the question of representativeness in the use of the data. The only answer to these criticisms lies in the quality of the work itself--in its ability to persuade by appealing to a level of "knowing" that exists in all of us but is not very often tapped. (Rubin, 1976, p. 13)

A phenomenological methodology provided a way of tapping into the lived meanings and life stories of six women who are experimenting with new family forms. A review of literature places the phenomenon of single mothers co-parenting within the social context of changing family patterns, alternative lifestyles and new trends in shared housing and shows this phenomenon to be relatively new and unstudied. This investigation has provided insights into the emotional worlds, choices and experiences that shape the lives of women parenting and living together. It has allowed the variations and differences between the three families to emerge and has also explored the themes that are common to the lives of all six women. The candor and vitality of these women's stories provides an opportunity to expand vision of the family and deepen understanding of the experiences of single mothers pioneering new family forms.

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