

Title	'Doing' separation in contemporary Ireland: the experiences of women who separate in midlife
Authors	Hyland, Lucy
Publication date	2013
Original Citation	Hyland, L. 2013. 'Doing' separation in contemporary Ireland: the experiences of women who separate in midlife. D.Soc.Sc Thesis, University College Cork.
Type of publication	Doctoral thesis
Rights	© 2013, Lucy Hyland - <a href="http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/">http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/</a>
Download date	2024-04-19 02:02:33
Item downloaded from	<a href="https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1179">https://hdl.handle.net/10468/1179</a>

**‘Doing’ Separation in Contemporary  
Ireland:  
The Experiences of Women who Separate in  
Midlife**

**Lucy Hyland**

**A thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Social Science to the  
National University of Ireland, at the School of Applied Social  
Studies, University College Cork.**

Submission Date: May 2013  
Supervisor: Dr. Jacqui O’Riordan  
Head of Department: Professor Fred Powell  
Student No: 107220903

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Table of Contents.....	ii
List of Tables.....	vi
Declaration.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Abstract.....	ix
<b>1. CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Introduction.....	1
Research on Separation and Divorce.....	4
Research Questions.....	7
Theoretical Orientation.....	9
Methodology.....	11
Outline of the Chapters.....	12
<b>2. CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING WOMEN, FAMILY AND MARRIAGE IN IRELAND 1950-2010.....</b>	<b>15</b>
Introduction.....	15
Women and the Catholic Church.....	16
Women and the State.....	23
Women, Work and the Economic System.....	28
Social Construction of Marriage and Heterosexual Relationships.....	31
The Women's Movement.....	34
Conclusion.....	35
<b>3. CHAPTER THREE: UNDERSTANDING SEPARATION AND DIVORCE.....</b>	<b>37</b>
Introduction.....	37
Irish Influences on Separation.....	38
Background to Divorce Referendum 1986.....	38
The Judicial Separation and Family Law Act, 1989.....	41
Second Referendum on Divorce 1995.....	42

Irish Socio-Demographic Trends.....	44
Social Correlates of Marriage Breakdown in Ireland.....	47
Studies on Irish Family Law Cases.....	49
Divorce Legislation in the USA and in the UK.....	51
Processes Leading To Separation.....	53
Changes in Society – Individualisation.....	53
Relationship Difficulties – Pathways to Disconnection.....	56
Life after Separation – Processes and Consequences.....	59
Stages in the Process – Endings and Beginnings.....	59
Coping, Support and Adaption following Separation.....	63
Housing and Financial Arrangements following Separation	65
Post-Separation Parenting.....	69
Experience of Initiators and Non-Initiators.....	71
Conclusion.....	72
<b>4. CHAPTER FOUR: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS AND EXPERIENCE OF SEPARATION.....</b>	<b>76</b>
Introduction.....	76
Influences on Conceptual Framework.....	78
Embeddedness.....	80
Love Labour.....	81
Transitions Framework – Endings and Beginnings.....	84
Endings and Loss.....	84
New Beginnings.....	85
Identity.....	86
Individualisation.....	88
Conclusion.....	91
<b>5. CHAPTER FIVE: METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>94</b>
Introduction.....	94
Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology.....	94
Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies.....	97
Choosing the Topic.....	98
Selection of Participants.....	99

	Narrative Interviews.....	101
	Choosing a Familiar Methodology and a Familiar Topic.....	105
	Processes used in the Analysis of the Data.....	106
	Ethical Considerations.....	112
	Conclusion.....	114
<b>6.</b>	<b>CHAPTER SIX: EARLY INFLUENCES AND EXPERIENCES OF MARRIAGE.....</b>	<b>115</b>
	Introduction.....	115
	Childhood .....	115
	Family of Origin Details.....	117
	Catholic Upbringing.....	118
	Access to Education.....	119
	Attitudes to Marital Separation.....	121
	Leaving Home – Identity Formation in Young Adulthood.....	125
	Forming Intimate Relationships.....	127
	Discussion: Embeddedness and Individualisation.....	131
	Experiences during Marriage.....	134
	Profile of Women during Marriage.....	135
	Transition to Parenthood.....	136
	Satisfaction with the Division of Household Tasks.....	140
	Financial Problems .....	144
	Sexual Relations.....	146
	Approaches to Resolving Conflict.....	149
	Quality of Couple Relationship .....	151
	Significant Events (Holidays, Illness, Death)-Turning Points.....	153
	Discussion: Problems with Love Labour in Marriages.....	156
	Conclusion.....	159
<b>7.</b>	<b>CHAPTER SEVEN: ‘DOING’ SEPARATION.....</b>	<b>162</b>
	Introduction.....	162
	Endings and Loss.....	162
	Women as Initiator.....	162
	Sudden Endings.....	164
	Endings Due To Infidelity.....	166

Storying the Ending.....	167
Moving out.....	169
The Pain and the Shame.....	169
Discussion: Endings and Loss.....	172
Legal, Financial and Housing Arrangements.....	173
Initiating Legal Proceedings – Public Ending.....	175
Negotiating Endings: Experiences of Mediation.....	177
Significance of the Ages of Children.....	180
Decisions about the Family Home.....	182
Income.....	185
Discussion: Public Endings and Division of Assets.....	188
Relationships following Separation.....	190
Contact with Ex Husband.....	190
Post-Separation Parenting.....	194
Renegotiating the ‘Doing’ of Family Events.....	197
Connectedness with Kin – Fear of Stigma.....	201
Relationships in Work and in a Social Context.....	204
Discussion: Fragmentation and Connectedness in Relationships following Separation.....	208
Women’s Identity Post-Separation.....	209
Conclusion.....	214
<b>8.    CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>217</b>
Introduction.....	217
1.    Impact of Family and Cultural Attitudes to Separation.....	218
2.    Processes and Events that Lead to Separation in Midlife.	221
3.    Losses and Gains.....	226
4.    Family Practices following Separation.....	230
5.    Connectedness and Fragmentation following Separation...	233
Concluding Comments.....	235
<b>9.    REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>10.   APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>249</b>

## **LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1: Thematic Framework.....	107
Table 2: Profile of the Women during Childhood.....	116
Table 3: Profile of Women during Marriage.....	134
Table 4: Legal, Financial and Housing Arrangements.....	174

## DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis which I now submit for examination for the award of doctor of Social Science, is entirely my own work and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

This thesis was prepared according to the regulations for postgraduate study by University College Cork and has not been submitted in whole or in part for an award in any other Institute or University.

The work reported on in this thesis conforms to the principles and requirements of the University's guidelines for ethics in research.

The University has permission to keep, to lend or to copy this thesis in whole or in part, on condition that any such use of the material of the thesis is duly acknowledged.

Candidate Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Jacqui O’Riordan, for introducing me to an inspiring range of feminist authors and for her guidance and encouragement throughout the writing of this dissertation. I would like to thank Professor Alistair Christie, Dr. Claire Edwards, Dr. Máire Leane and the staff of the School of Applied Social Studies in UCC, for their support throughout the programme. I would like to thank my fellow students for their friendship and assistance. I would like to thank my colleagues at Carlow College for their on-going help and encouragement. I would like to thank the staff at NUI Maynooth, Kilkenny Campus, for their help during the early stages of this project.

I would like to thank my three brothers, James, Pat and William, for always being there if I needed them. I would like to thank my two children, Fiona and Jack, who had to live with me through the ups and downs that have been my life for the past five years. I have drawn huge strength from knowing that my sister, my mother and my father would all have been so proud of me if they had lived to see me complete this study. I would like to thank my friends who have continued to stay in touch and to help me in so many ways. I want to mention, in particular, my friend, Kay O’Reilly, for being my mentor on all things to do with Irish women.

Lastly, I would like to thank the fourteen women who told me their stories. I know it was not easy for any of them to recount in detail what were very painful memories. My hope is that I have done justice to their stories and that together we have drawn attention to what was a previously unseen and poorly understood aspect of Irish women’s lives.

## ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of Irish women who separate in midlife. Census 2011 results show that 203,964 people are currently separated and divorced in Ireland and that, of these, 115,046 are female. The Census also shows that the peak age at which separation occurs is forty-eight years of age (C.S.O., 2012). No Irish studies have been done specifically into how women experience separation in midlife. Recent research interest in Ireland has been on the impact of separation on children (Hogan *et al.*, 2002), on grandparents (Timonen *et al.*, 2009), on post-separation legal arrangements (Coulter, 2008; Moore, 2010; Mahon and Moore, 2011) and on statistical analyses of marital breakdown (Fahey and Field, 2008; Lunn *et al.*, 2009). The rationale for choosing to study this age group of women is because they are the first generation of Irish women to publically separate in midlife in such large numbers. All of them will have entered marriage at a time when divorce was not possible in Ireland and as such they are broadly without a cultural 'script' for how to 'do' separation.

An exploratory study was conducted to try to capture the processes and events that are part of the lived experiences of separation for women in midlife. A qualitative interpretative approach was taken to the collection and analysis of data. In-depth interviews were conducted with fourteen women who fitted the age criteria and who had separated within the previous ten years. The women were recruited following their attendance at post-separation courses. The participants included women who identified themselves as either the initiators or the non-initiators of their separations. The participants came from predominantly middle class backgrounds. Nine of the fourteen women held professional qualifications and had worked full-time throughout their marriage. Narrative interviews were conducted which covered topics such as the attitudes to separation internalised during childhood, the genesis of the marital problems, the events that triggered the separations, the women's emotional reactions at the time of separating and their social, housing and financial outcomes of having separated.

A theoretical framework using concepts related to connectedness and fragmentation was used to analyse the data. This approach is similar to that taken by Smart (2007) in which she presents a 'connectedness thesis' in opposition to the 'individualisation thesis' (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002) as an approach to understanding separating/divorcing families.

Significant diversity was found in the experiences of the interviewees, making it difficult to draw conclusions that covered all situations. As a general rule, most of the women retained connectedness to their children, to their families of origin and to friends who were not joint friends. Significant fragmentation was found in relationships with ex-husbands, with in-laws and with joint friends. Contact with ex-husbands was maintained in only a minority of cases. All of the women were worse off financially than if they had remained married. They felt socially isolated in the aftermath of separation. The most difficult aspect of separation for the women was the emotional aspect. They had been raised in an era when marriage was central to a woman's identity and many of them were struggling to

establish positive identities as separated women. While a few of the women were very relieved that their marriages had ended, for most, separation had been experienced as a painful episode in their lives.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

## **Introduction**

On Easter Sunday morning, the 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2008, I discovered that my husband was having an affair. He moved out of our home for good one week later. This is obviously not the whole story but, for my children's sake, it is as much as I am prepared to tell. The following November I attended two post-separation courses in Dublin. Neither course was advertised as being solely for women or as being specifically for women aged over forty-five years of age, but that is who was there. It seemed to me that there was a phenomenon taking place across the country, namely that Irish people who were in their forties and fifties were separating, about which very little had been written or was known and which warranted further study.

This study hopes to contribute towards a greater understanding of what is a relatively new, but statistically significant aspect of Irish family life. Recent figures published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO, September 2012) show that in 2011 a total of 203,964 people were either separated or divorced in Ireland and that, of these, 115,046 were women. The CSO report (2012) also states that "the rate of separation begins to increase when people are in their late twenties and increases steadily throughout the thirties and forties, reaching a peak at age forty-eight" (p.9). These figures confirm that separation currently affects a significant number of people in Ireland and that it predominantly affects people in their forties and fifties. No research has been done into separation in this age group or, more specifically, into women who separate in this age group. This study hopes to begin to address that gap in the research.

A further rationale for the study is that the age group of women with which it is concerned constitute the first generation of Irish women to openly separate in such large numbers. Women who are currently in midlife will have entered marriage at a time when divorce was illegal in Ireland. (For reasons which will be explained later, the words 'separation' and 'divorce' are used interchangeably

here.) It is likely that these women will have been socialised to believe in lifelong marriage. They are the first generation of Irish women to experience such a public change in the structure of their marriages and of their families. There is no clear cultural script for how this age group of Irish women should 'do' separation. How they make sense of and feel about separation will not be the same for women in other countries or, possibly, even for later generations of Irish women. It is, therefore, important to give voice to the experiences of these women now in order to support them through this new transition in the life story of Irish women.

From a social policy perspective, it is important to understand the circumstances of families in which mothers separate at midlife and the supports these families may require. Separation has implications, not just for families with young children, as has been the subject of much recent research (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Mahon and Moore, 2011) but also for families with older adolescents and young adults. Many young adults in contemporary Ireland are financially dependent on their parents well into their twenties, due to remaining in education or due to the current high rate of unemployment (Share *et al.*, 2012). As the literature review will show, women who separate in midlife may be at greater risk of poverty (Weston and Smyth, 2000), they may have inadequate pension contributions (Hilton and Anderson, 2009) and they may be living alone (Lunn *et al.*, 2009). These are all issues which will have implications for the level of services and supports required by separated women into old age.

Before proceeding any further, each of the terms in the title of the dissertation will be explained. 'Doing' separation refers to the behaviour and family practices that emerge as part of the process of separation. It links with Morgan's (1996) suggestion that in order to understand families, family practices, rather than ideology on families, need to be observed and analysed. Morgan's maxim is 'that families are what families do'. Family practices refer to the ordinary, everyday interactions that are part of 'doing' family. Family members talk to each other. They exchange resources and services. They have shared knowledge of each other's lives and needs (Cheal, 2002). This study is setting out to explore what

happens to ordinary, everyday family interactions when a marriage breaks down and spouses no longer live together.

The term 'separation' refers simply to the decision to end a marriage and to live separately. Prior to divorce being legalised in Ireland in 1997, many couples separated but could not divorce. Under current Irish divorce legislation a couple must be separated for four of the previous five years before a divorce can be granted (Nestor, 2006). Separation is, therefore, a significant part of the experience of marital breakdown in Ireland. Some of the participants in the study had proceeded to divorce but the focus was primarily on their experiences during separation.

'Experience' is defined in the phenomenological sense of 'lived experience'. This encompasses trying to capture both the emotional and practical aspects of separation, as well as the processes and events that make up the experience and have implications for women's identity following separation. A basic assumption of the study is that separation is a gendered experience and will be perceived somewhat differently by men and women. However, there is no assumption that separation will be experienced in the same way by all women, or even by all Irish women who are in midlife. The challenge is to accurately represent the diversity of experience that the primary data contains.

There is no agreement in the literature on when 'midlife' begins or when it ends. It is variously defined as starting between thirty-five (Bogolub, 1991) and forty years of age (Uhlenberg *et al.*, 1990; Montenegro *et al.*, 2004) and ending between fifty-five and sixty years of age. For the purposes of this study, midlife is defined as being between forty-five and fifty-nine years of age, as this represents the age range of the participants in the study.

## **Research on Separation and Divorce**

It was very difficult to find studies which dealt specifically with women who separated in midlife. According to Smart (1999), there was some sympathy during the 1960s in the UK for older women whose husbands divorced them, but

“what sympathy there was, quickly evaporated a decade later when they were redefined as alimony drones and as women who were too idle to work” (p.8). As a consequence of the scarcity of literature specifically on women who separated in midlife, the search was quickly broadened to include literature on separation and divorce which occurred at any age. The bodies of literature deemed to be relevant to the research topic were Irish and international literature on women, marriage, family, separation and divorce.

Much of the Irish literature reviewed deals with the events, structures and ideologies, mainly ideologies on gender and familism, which have shaped Irish women’s lives over the past sixty years and have influenced their attitudes to marriage, family and separation (O’Hara, 1997; Inglis, 1998, 2003; O’Connor, 1998; Bacik, 2004; Connolly and O’Toole, 2005; Barry, 2008). O’Connor (1998) identified the Catholic Church, the state, the economic system, the cultural and social construction of heterosexual relationships and the women’s movement as being the key influences on Irish women who are now in midlife. The teachings of the Catholic Church were identified (O’Connor, 1998; Bacik, 2004) as being the most influential factor on women’s attitudes to marriage and separation up to the 1990s. Opposition to the two divorce referenda in 1986 and 1995 showed the depth of feeling in the country against divorce but also a move towards acknowledging the reality that some marriages did break down and that couples did separate. Changes in women’s employment options, changes in equality legislation and changes in the social construction of gender roles also played a role in shifting attitudes in Ireland towards a more liberal approach to dealing with marital breakdown.

Inglis (2008), however, claims that most Irish people still retain residues of traditional Catholic teaching in their belief systems. “Being Catholic is part of most people’s cultural heritage. It is a way of being in the world, of understanding themselves, that they are happy to accept” (p.148). A key premise of this study is that the experience of living through the changes from a society in which Catholic familist ideology was dominant to a more liberal society in which there are more choices about how people ‘do’ family is likely to impact on women who separate in Ireland in midlife. As mentioned, this topic will be

discussed further in the next chapters when discussing the social construction of women, family, marriage and separation in Ireland.

Recent Irish research on separation has tended to focus on children (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Moore, 2010; Mahon and Moore, 2011), on legal arrangements (Coulter, 2008) on grandparents (Timonen *et al.*, 2009) and on statistical analyses of rates of separation and divorce (Lunn *et al.*, 2009; CSO, 2012). Common findings in the studies listed are that children tend to remain in their family homes with their mothers following separation. Joint custody is usually awarded, with fathers having access to and providing maintenance for dependent children, but maintenance is rarely provided for wives. The issues raised in these studies (Moore and Mahon, 2011) concern the impact of separation on children, the risk of poverty for women and children following separation, the impact of parental conflict on children and the role of fathers and grandparents in post-separation families.

As mentioned, there is no research specifically on the experience of marital breakdown for women who separate in midlife. It is not clear why the voices of such women have not been heard or why their experiences have been so invisible. It may relate to the invisibility of those who provide care (Lynch, 2007) and those whose roles are more associated with the 'private' sphere. It may relate to the invisibility of 'women of a certain age'. Writing in an American context, Bateson (2000) comments on how few stories are told about women in midlife. She suggests that this may be about to change because "[n]ow, however, there is a substantial period when many women no longer find the meaning of their lives through their roles as mothers, and do not immediately segue into the grandparent role" (p. 102). It may be that midlife as a life stage was not visible for Irish women in previous generations because it took place in the private sphere and that this script too, as well as the script on how to 'do' separation, is being written by women in contemporary Ireland.

The international literature on separation and divorce which was found and reviewed for this study was mainly written from sociological, psychological and practice-oriented perspectives. The sociological studies (e.g. Dronkers *et al.*,

2006; Smart, 2007) largely dealt with the impact of changes in society on marital breakdown. The societal changes identified as contributing to the increased rate of marriage breakdown included globalisation and individualisation, changing gender roles and the removal of barriers to divorce. The psychological literature (e.g. Amato, 2000; Lowenstein, 2007) dealt, in a more linear fashion, with the 'causes' and 'consequences' of divorce. It also dealt with the factors that facilitated or hindered adjustment to divorce. The practice-oriented literature (e.g. Carter and McGoldrick, 2005; O'Hara, 2011) dealt with the range of emotions that people go through in their journeys through separation, the stages that are typically involved in the process and the type of support that people need.

A key theme in the literature reviewed and explored for this research is that separation needs to be seen as a transition and not as a failure (Bateson, 2000; Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). Another theme involves seeing families not as being broken or fragmented by separation but as being connected and re-configured in different ways (Smart, 2007). The message coming through is that people can adapt to this transition and treat it as just one more chapter in their adult lives (Bateson, 2000). The other message coming through is that it is preferable if separations can be dealt with in a harmonious manner. Conflict, according to Smart (1999), has been identified as the most damaging aspect of separation, particularly where there are children involved. There has been increasing concern that fathers are being excluded from their children's lives. Recent research (Rhoades, 2002; Trinder, 2008) has focussed on the implications of the shift towards equality in parenting on relationships following separation/divorce.

The main topics in the international research which deals specifically with women in midlife are that women are at greater risk of poverty following divorce, that the reason they delay divorce until midlife is because they are waiting for children to leave home (Montenegro *et al.*, 2004), that divorce at midlife is motivated by a desire for 'individualisation', a concept which will be explained later, and by what is called a 'midlife crisis' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995) and that coming to terms with divorce at midlife entails being

able to ascribe a positive meaning to divorce and being able to construct a positive identity as an individual rather than as part of a couple (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005).

The research questions which follow were influenced by the findings in the literature reviewed and link with the key issues which were identified on the topic of separation and divorce.

### **Research Questions**

The overarching question with which this study is concerned is how Irish women are 'doing' separation. This broad question is broken down into five questions as follows:

1. In what ways do family and cultural attitudes to marital breakdown influence how women in midlife experience separation in Ireland?
2. What are the key contributory processes and events that lead to separation in midlife?
3. What losses and gains are experienced as part of the transition through separation?
4. In what ways are relationships and family practices reconstructed following separation?
5. Do the experiences of women following separation make sense when viewed through the lenses of connectedness and fragmentation?

The background to the first question is a belief that the experience of separation can only be understood within the context in which it occurs (Hogan *et al.*, 2002). The question was asked in order to find out how women who were raised in a traditional Catholic society in which divorce was illegal went on to come to terms with separation/divorce in their own lives. The suggestion was that these women would experience separation differently than younger women or women from countries in which divorce was more of a normative experience.

The background to the second question was that separation could not be understood, according to Amato (2000), without knowing the events and

processes that led up to it. The experience of separation was seen as a process that had a 'before', a 'during' and an 'after'. In other words, the approach taken was that separation began long before the actual separation took place, that it included an initial period when the decision to separate was disclosed and arrangements were made to move out and that coming to terms with separation and re-constituting relationships afterwards were all part of the experience of separation.

The background to the third question was that it was important to acknowledge that separation was a journey that people transitioned through (Ahrons, 2005), but that it was also important to draw attention to the specific losses as well as the specific gains that separation entailed. The reason for drawing attention to the losses and gains was so that they would not be diluted in an approach that focussed solely on the end point before it explored the points along the way.

The background to the fourth question was to begin to explore how Irish women were 'doing family' post-separation. Separation in such large numbers is such a relatively new phenomenon in Irish families that the question was asked in an attempt to find out what practices were actually taking place in separated families and how extended families and friends were re-acting.

The fifth question was asked in an attempt to focus more specifically on the connectedness and fragmentation of relationships that result from the 'doing' of separation. This question picks up on the concerns in the literature about the breakdown or fragmentation of relationships (Gillies, 2003). It also links with Smart's (2007) suggestion that research on separating families should look for evidence of connectedness rather than focussing solely on evidence of fragmentation.

## **Theoretical Orientation**

The study is being written primarily from a sociological perspective in that it is concerned with the relationship between individuals and their social context, between women who separate and the society in which they live. The approach

taken is based on Weber's view of sociology "as the study of human action and of the meanings that actors give to their world" (Share *et al.*, 2012: 9). This approach holds that 'truth' is relative and that there are multiple 'realities'. The task is to capture the diversity of experiences and the different 'realities' of separation as described by the women themselves.

The study is located broadly within family sociology (Morgan, 2002) and, more specifically, within recent debates in sociology about the changing nature of personal and family relationships (Gillies, 2003). Morgan (2002) identifies two broad perspectives within family sociology. One approach sees family as an independent variable which is unique and about which sociology can provide only a partial understanding, the remainder coming within the realms of psychology and biology. The other approach sees family as a dependent variable which is merely a subset of society and can be analysed in much the same way as any other social institution. The solution, Morgan (2002) suggests, is to take a middle ground position between the two approaches, to include elements of both the micro and the macro influences on family interactions and to emphasise the 'doing' of family practices. As mentioned on page 2, this is the approach taken in this study. It is setting out to explore family practices, in particular, family practices around the 'doing' of separation. The study is located on the middle ground between broad sociological theories (functionalism, feminism and individualisation) and their application to family life and more socio-psychological theories (attachment theory, sociology of emotions and symbolic interactionism) which focus on family interaction at the level of individual actors.

Gillies (2003) identified three themes in the recent sociological debates about the changing nature of personal and intimate relationships: breakdown, democratisation and individualisation. 'Breakdown' refers to the ways in which the structures within families and intimate relationships are breaking down as evidenced by the increase in births outside marriage, the increase in cohabitation, the emergence of same sex couples and the increase in the rates of separation and divorce. This study is clearly about the breakdown aspect, more particularly about the breakdown of marital relationships. 'Democratisation' refers to the

increasing equality in relationships between men and women and between parents and children. 'Individualisation' refers to the loosening of constraints by families and traditional structures and the pursuit of individual goals and self fulfilment (Giddens, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002). All three themes are of relevance for this study.

Smart (2007) identifies a tension in the sociology of family life between grand theoretical statements about individualisation and the findings of small, detailed empirical studies which do not validate the theories put forward by the grand theorists. This dissertation describes one such empirical study. Smart contends that family relationships are not fragmenting in the manner described by, for example, individualisation theorists such as Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002). Smart's studies have led her to suggest that families are not fragmenting but are being re-constituted in different ways and that different forms of connectedness are being re-negotiated in families, for example in families in which divorce has occurred.

Following Smart's (2007) approach, this study set out to explore continuity and connectedness in how Irish women 'do' separation. However, the study also set out to explore whether fragmentation of relationships was a feature of life after separation for the women in the study. A number of concepts were drawn upon in the analysis of the primary data. The concept of 'embeddedness' was used to analyse data on how attitudes to marriage and separation internalised during childhood affected how Irish women experienced their own separations. The concept of 'love labour' was used to examine the behaviours and processes around showing love or failing to show love which contributed to difficulties in marriages and led to eventual separations. The concept of 'transition' was used to capture the series of losses and gains that occurred during the women's journeys through separation. The concept of 'identity' was used to examine the shift in identity required as a result of the break-up of a long-term marriage. The concept of 'individualisation' was used when considering women's disconnection from 'traditional' beliefs, their motivation for initiating separation and when considering how relationships were re-configured following separation.

The overall objective was to explore how Irish women are ‘doing’ separation and whether elements of connectedness and fragmentation can be observed in how they are restructuring relationships in the aftermath of separation.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative interpretative approach was adopted in order to explore how Irish women make sense of the events and processes that occur during and after their journeys through separation. As mentioned, this approach is based on the assumption that there is not just one ‘reality’ but that there are multiple ‘realities’ and that the best way to find out about these realities is to ask people who are experiencing them. Feminist approaches to research (Harding, 1987; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Byrne and Lentin, 2000) informed many of the decisions taken about how the data were collected and analysed. Establishing collaborative relationships with the research participants and reflexivity on how the study was being carried out were guiding principles during the research. Ethical considerations, in particular, the need for informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, were adhered to throughout the project.

In-depth interviews of a narrative type were conducted with fourteen women who were recruited following their attendance at two post-separation courses. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. The women consented to the interviews being taped. A thematic framework (see page 107) was deduced from the transcripts of the interviews. Direct quotations constitute the bulk of the data presented. Every effort was made to ensure that the women’s voices were heard. The themes were analysed using theoretical concepts ranging from connectedness to fragmentation as described above, and in line with the literature reviewed in chapters 2 and 3 on understanding women, family, marriage and separation in Ireland and in an international context. The conclusions drawn are structured around exploring the research questions posed at the outset.

It is acknowledged that the small size of the sample means that findings cannot be generalised to a larger population. The only claim that is being made is that this study represents the views of fourteen separated Irish women and offers an

insight into the complexity of their experiences of separation. The strength of the study lies in the richness of the data collected. The data provide a base from which to begin to explore a previously unexplored phenomenon.

## **Outline of the Chapters**

**Chapter 1** has outlined the rationale for the study and how the topic was chosen. It has identified the bodies of literature reviewed that deal with separation and divorce and the current themes with which that literature is concerned. It has explained the background to the research questions and the theoretical approach adopted for the study. It has described the methodology used in the study and the ethical considerations that needed to be taken into account.

**Chapter 2**, entitled “Understanding Women, Family and Marriage in Ireland 1950 -2010” provides the historical and cultural context for the study. It consists of a literature review of key aspects of Irish society which influenced the views of Irish women on women’s roles, family and marriage. The chapter details the events and structures that shaped women’s lives over the sixty year period with which this study is concerned. It illustrates the changes, but also the continuities, in attitudes towards women and marriage during this period.

**Chapter 3**, entitled “Understanding Separation and Divorce” provides further contextual material. It consists of a review of national and international research on separation and divorce. It begins by reviewing material on the background to the introduction of divorce legislation in Ireland. It outlines socio-demographic data on the rates of separation and divorce and on the social correlates of marriage breakdown in Ireland. It describes trends that are occurring in Irish family law cases. The chapter then reviews international studies on how societal change is impacting on the incidence of separation and divorce. It also reviews material on the interpersonal factors that have been found to lead to decisions to separate, as well as material on the processes and outcomes that occur as a result of separation.

**Chapter 4** deals with the key theoretical approaches that informed the study. The study's location in the middle ground between macro and micro sociological theories is outlined. The influences of functionalism and feminism on how family is conceptualised are discussed. The writings that Smart (2007) based her 'connectedness thesis' on are described. The ways in which the concepts of connectedness and fragmentation and the related concepts of embeddedness, love labour, transition and individualisation are utilised in the analysis of the data are described.

**Chapter 5** describes the methodology used in the study. It outlines the assumptions upon which the work is based and the rationale for deciding to use a qualitative interpretative approach. The chapter details how feminist research methods and ethical considerations guided how the study was conducted. It lays out the reasoning behind decisions taken to use narrative interviews for the collection of primary data and the factors taken into account in the selection of participants and in the analysis of data.

**Chapter 6** is the first of two chapters in which the data are presented and analysed. This chapter deals with the early parts of the women's lives, up to the point at which they separated from their husbands. It describes in detail the attitudes to marital separation that the women were aware of during their childhood years. It describes their young adult years, their courtships, their marriages, their transitions to parenthood and the processes and events that led to difficulties in their marriages. Love labour is the concept used to analyse much of the data in this section. A common theme in all fourteen stories was a feeling of not being loved. Love, in the context of this study, involves the physical, mental and cognitive work that is involved in the doing of love labour.

**Chapter 7** presents and analyses the data on the events that triggered separations and on the processes and events that took place subsequently. It outlines the legal, housing and financial arrangements that were made following separation. It describes relationships following separation; relationships with former spouses, children, families of origin, in-laws, joint friends and work colleagues. It gives detailed accounts of how family events are celebrated and of the changes that

have occurred in the women's social lives. It summarises the women's concluding comments on how they make sense of the whole experience of separation.

**Chapter 8** contains the conclusions and is structured around answering each of the research questions. Notwithstanding the small sample used in this study, significant diversity was found in the experiences of the fourteen interviewees. Most of the women retained connectedness to their children, to their families of origin and to friends who were not joint friends. However, significant fragmentation was found in relationships with ex-husbands, with in-laws and with joint friends. All of the women were worse off financially and they also felt socially isolated following separation, but by far the most difficult aspect of separation was the emotional aspect. Many of the women were struggling to establish positive identities as separated women. They had started to construct new lives for themselves but, apart from one or two, most of the women in this study had found the journey through separation to be very stressful.

## **CHAPTER 2:**

# **UNDERSTANDING WOMEN, FAMILY AND MARRIAGE IN IRELAND 1950 -2010**

### **Introduction**

The experience of marital separation for women can only be understood within the social, cultural and historical context in which it occurs (Hogan *et al.*, 2002). The experience of separation will partly depend on how embedded the women are in the cultural norms about women's roles, about marriage and separation in the families and in the communities in which they grew up and in which they live as adults. While acknowledging that differences exist in the living situations of many Irish women, O'Connor, contends that "women in Ireland, regardless of their age, life stage, ascribed social class position and participation in employment, are surrounded by structural and cultural cues that define their lives" (O'Connor, 1998: 4). Understanding Irish women's experience of separation needs, firstly, to be located within an understanding of the 'structural and cultural cues' that influence Irish women's lives.

Inglis (1998) suggests that "Irish society is best analysed in terms of different, overlapping social fields" (p. 205) and that each field may have a different type of discourse, a different set of cultural cues and a different set of experts. O'Connor (1998) identifies five such 'fields' in Irish society as being influential on women's position: the Catholic Church, the state, the economic system, the cultural and social construction of heterosexual relationships and the women's movement. These areas are overlapping and not mutually exclusive. Each has an influence on women's lives and how they experience marriage and separation. Each of these aspects will be discussed, in turn, in this chapter and connections between them highlighted, in order to contextualise how separation in midlife is experienced by Irish women.

## **Women and the Catholic Church**

The Catholic Church is widely recognised as having played a significant role in shaping ideology about gender and family in Ireland (O'Connor, 1998; Connolly, 2003; Bacik, 2004; Inglis, 2005). In order to understand Irish women who are now in midlife it is necessary to understand the influence of the Catholic Church on women over the past sixty years. It is suggested that the Church influenced (and continues to influence) women on several levels (O'Connor, 1998): it influenced women through its involvement in the educational system and through the rituals of Mass and the Catholic sacraments. It also influenced women's lives through its shaping of the laws that were enacted by the state, as will be discussed in the next section.

When the women who participated in this study were growing up, the teachings of the Catholic Church on women, on family life and on marriage were the dominant values transmitted to Catholic children both at home and in school. Mahon (1994) argues that "a church controlled educational system facilitated both social integration and socialisation into Catholic norms and values" (p.1278). Given that the Catholic Church owned and managed (and still owns and manages) over 90% of the schools in the state, the vast majority of Irish women who are now in or near midlife will have been educated by nuns in Catholic-run schools (Bacik, 2004).

Socialisation into a Catholic ethos was implemented in schools through staffing, symbols, the physical environment and through the curriculum (Tovey and Share, 2000). Teachers were trained in religious run sex-segregated teacher training colleges and the nuns and priests who ran these colleges "looked for a strong Catholic ethos in applicants, most of whom came from rural backgrounds where Catholic values were strongest" (Mahon, 1994:1279). Staff members were expected to adhere to a Catholic ethos both in their teaching and in their private lives, as the case of Eileen Flynn (detailed below) illustrates. Religiously symbolic holy pictures and statues adorned the walls of corridors and classrooms. Classes began and ended with a prayer. Ten per cent of the timetable was allocated to religion (Mahon, 1994:1279). Preparation for the key childhood

sacraments of First Holy Communion and Confirmation<sup>1</sup> took place within school time and were an integral part of the school year, as well as marking an exit from primary school, as in the case of Confirmation.

Eileen Flynn was sacked from her position as a secondary school teacher in Wexford in 1982, because she was unmarried with a baby son and was living with the child's father, who was a separated man (Holland, 1985). Eileen took a case to court on the grounds of unlawful dismissal but she lost the case. The judge ruled that the religious order was within its rights to dismiss the teacher on the basis that the members of the order had a right to operate in a manner which was consistent with the ethos of the school and in line with their religious beliefs (Holland, 1985). Eileen had openly breached the code which forbade pre marital sex, unmarried motherhood, cohabitation and having a relationship with a married man. More recent equality legislation in Ireland, the Employment Equality Act 1998 and the Equal Status Acts 2000 to 2004, continues to exempt religious institutions from compliance with these Acts on religious grounds (Coen, 2008).

While the religious educators may have passed on traditional moral values to the girls in their care, there is no sense that they took the education of girls less seriously than the education of boys (Clear, 2001). Mahon (1994) suggests that "the education of girls was equally important as the education of boys, as their spiritual welfare was important" (p.1281). However, gendered ideologies were apparent in that girls were geared towards more 'female' subjects, like domestic science and typing, and occupations such as nursing, teaching and secretarial work. On the one hand, girls were educated to enter the world of work, on the other hand they were socialised to be "guardians of the moral order, to be unselfish and non-assertive (Lynch, 1988:27). However, Irish girls, unlike girls in some countries, had equal access to education and were expected to work hard

---

<sup>1</sup> Holy Communion is one of seven sacraments that Catholics may receive during their lifetimes. First Holy Communion is a ceremony which signifies that a child has reached the use of reason, thereby knowing right from wrong. It is generally received for the first time when a child is seven or eight years of age.

Confirmation is another of the seven sacraments within the Catholic Church. This sacrament is generally administered to a young person at the age of twelve or thirteen years. Confirmation marks the transition, by way of a ceremony, to early adulthood.

and to pass exams (Kenny, 2003). It is argued that while there was a gender bias in education, there was an even more significant class bias (O'Connor, 1998; Lynch, 1999). Lynch (1999) highlighted "very significant differences in patterns of achievement across social groups" (p.171) despite the fact that in Ireland by the late 1990s a high proportion of students stayed on in education to Leaving Certificate<sup>2</sup> level.

Reflecting on forty years of feminism, Mary Kenny (2003) wonders whether "some aspects of feminism were the continuous and direct result of convent education" (p.8). She suggests that Mother Superiors<sup>3</sup> represented female role models who were in charge of managing "great estates and in effect international corporations" (p.8). The nuns provided a different model of what a woman could achieve for the girls in their schools to that of, for instance, their mothers. The drawback was that in order to achieve this greatness, girls had to be unmarried and celibate (O'Connor, 1998), and live somewhat apart from the community and their families. There was a very limited range of role models available for girls in an Irish society in which hegemonic Catholic femininity was so rigidly defined.

The notion of embeddedness in Catholicism, particularly during their childhoods, is key to understanding the experience of the women who participated in this study. In the 1950s and 1960s, messages about how to be a good girl and later a good wife and mother were "inculcated in the way the Church represented women, the way mothers raised their daughters, the way girls were taught in schools, and the way women enforced the message to each other" (Inglis, 2003: 137). The messages for girls were predominantly about the virtues of self-denial (Inglis, 2005). Mothers, in particular, at that time were expected to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children and their husbands (Inglis, 1998). Norms about patriarchy and the dominance of males over females abounded

---

<sup>2</sup> The Leaving Certificate is a State examination taken by students on completion of second level education.

<sup>3</sup> A Mother Superior is a nun in charge of a religious congregation of women who live under vows within the Catholic Church. Hill (2009) states "nuns often monopolized the senior positions of hospital matrons or secondary school principal within the Catholic community" (p.47)

within the Church (O'Connor, 1998), as evidenced by the expectation that nuns should be subservient to priests and brothers.

Inglis (2008) contends that most Irish women, during the 1950s and 1960s, willingly embraced Catholicism. “The majority of Irish people gave their hearts, minds and bodies to the Catholic Church. Catholic prayers and rituals were at the heart of family life” (Inglis, 2008: 144) and “the family was at the heart of Irish social reproduction” (Inglis, 1998: 167). Women gained status from being closely associated with the activities of the local Catholic priests. Catholic teachings made sense of women’s lives of service to others, denial of self and prioritising of family needs over individual needs. Women were assured that they would get their reward in the ‘next life’, that is after death, and that they should not expect too much in this life. According to Inglis (1998), women and priests ruled in the homes and men ruled in the fields and in the pubs. Women gained status from being responsible for producing the next generation of Catholics, many of whom were expected to go on to become priests and nuns. It was the height of respectability and a source of family pride to have a daughter a nun or a son a priest (Brody, 1974; Inglis, 1998).

While there were benefits attached to Irish women’s adherence to Catholic doctrines and rules, there were also costs. One of these costs involved having no access to artificial means of contraception. The papal encyclical, *Humanae Vitae* 1967, which was issued as part of proceedings at Vatican 11, decreed that abortion, sterilisation and all artificial methods of contraception were immoral. “Similarly excluded is any action which either before, at the moment of, or after sexual intercourse, is specifically intended to prevent procreation—whether as an end or as a means” (Vatican, 1967:16). In the absence of contraception, Irish married women were consigned to having a large number of children. Within marriage, women were expected to be sexually available for procreation (Hill, 2003). Within the Catholic Church, marriage was seen, first and foremost, as a sacrament. It was the usual practice for women to seek advice on family planning or sexuality problems from the priest in the confessional (Ferriter, 2009) and not from the doctor. Ferriter recalls the experience of a woman who had yearly pregnancies during her marriage and who sought advice in Confession. The

priest's advice was "as long as you are sleeping with him you are the occasion of his sin" (Ferriter, 2009: 353). This use of Confession<sup>4</sup> was central to the church maintaining its power in the control of sex (Inglis, 1998) and of women.

One of the other costs for women of adherence to Catholic teachings was that they had no access to divorce and were consigned to having to stay for life in marriages where there may have been serious difficulties, for example, alcohol abuse or domestic violence (O'Connor, 1998; Bacik, 2004). This topic will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter which deals more specifically with literature on separation and divorce.

From the 1960s and 1970s onwards the influence of the Catholic Church began to wane as a result of the increasing secularisation of Irish society (Inglis, 2008). There had been a move away from agriculture and an opening up of the economy and the society to more liberal influences from outside the country. With the shift to urbanisation, family members moved in search of employment to towns and cities away from the traditional and conservative attitudes that were prevalent in rural areas. This afforded greater freedom from the influence of extended families and local communities.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the influence of the Catholic Church was further weakened by a number of high profile scandals involving religious personnel. In May 1992, Bishop Eamonn Casey (1927 - ) was found to have fathered a son with an American divorced woman, Annie Murphy (Hill, 2003). Fr. Michael Cleary (1934 -1993) was also found to have had two sons with Phyllis Hamilton who had been his housekeeper for twenty-six years (Scannal, RTE 1, 2006). Details emerged in 1994 that Fr. Brendan Smyth (1927 – 1997) had been sexually abusing children for forty years and that his superiors' response had been to move him to a new place each time an allegation was disclosed (Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2009). Scandals of the abuse of children in industrial schools<sup>5</sup> and

---

<sup>4</sup> Confession is another of the seven sacraments within the Catholic Church where sins are confessed to a priest and forgiveness for the sins is sought.

<sup>5</sup> Industrial schools for the incarceration of children who were orphaned, neglected, abandoned or unmanageable in Ireland were largely run by religious orders. While in care many children suffered abuse (physical, sexual and/or psychological) from those adults responsible for their safety. The emphasis had been on the spiritual welfare of the children, not on their physical, emotional or psychological welfare (Ferriter, 2009).

of women in Magdalen laundries<sup>6</sup>, while in church run institutional care, were also exposed by the media in the early 1990s (Inglis, 1998). The Church that preached a strict sexual morality was shown not to have been practising what it preached. Exile of errant clergy and cover-up seem to have been the Church's response.

It is not possible to gauge exactly what impact the disclosures about the sexually inappropriate behaviour of priests and the mishandling of the clerical abuse of children had on Irish people at the time. They undoubtedly contributed to the lessening of the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2009). For whatever reasons, whether it was due to the increasing secularisation of society or distrust of the Church due to allegations of clerical sexual misconduct, recent studies (detailed below) show a significant decrease in the numbers of Irish people who continue to attend Church on as regular a basis as would have been common in previous generations.

Data from the European Social Survey (ESSR) Round 4 (2009/10) and the International Social Science Programme (ISSP) III Religion (2008/2009) show that from the late 1980s there was a fall off in attendance at daily and weekly Mass in Ireland (O'Mahony, 2010: 5). In 2006/7 this figure had dropped to 56.4% from 63.2% in 2002/3. By 2009, there was a further drop to 51.6% (p.6). For the age group 45-54 years, the age cohort with which this study is concerned, the practice of weekly or more often attendance at Mass, considered to be a key signifier of religious attachment, had changed during their lifetime, from an attendance rate of 82.2% when this age cohort were aged twelve years to an attendance rate of 44.3% by age 45 years (O'Mahony, 2010: 8). There is a slight variation in the ESSR figures for the same age group which shows that about 41% of the 45-54 year old Catholics attended weekly Mass in 2009/10 (p.11). The ESSR also found that weekly or more often Mass attendance was highest among people with the lowest educational attainment (p.13) and was highest

---

<sup>6</sup> In Ireland, there were institutions called Magdalen laundries (Ferriter, 2009) run by religious orders to rehabilitate women believed to be of low moral character, like prostitutes or women being pregnant outside of marriage. In the process of moral rehabilitation that exercised a strong social control over their lives in the laundries "rigid discipline and harsh treatment were meted out"(Hill, 2003: 131) to these women who were isolated from their home communities. In an obsession with morality and sexuality the social problems of isolation, poverty and lack of opportunity that these women experienced were ignored (Considine and Dukelow, 2009).

among women who were full-time housewives and lived in rural areas (O'Hara, 1997).

It is not clear to what extent women who grew up in this traditional Catholic context are still influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church about marriage and family. According to Inglis (2007), the significant events in Irish women's lives are still often marked out by religious rituals. "They like the rituals and celebrations that surround Baptisms, First Holy Communions, Confirmations, weddings and funerals...Even those who rarely give much time or thought to the Church would find it difficult to forgo these events or to celebrate them in a Protestant Church" (Inglis, 2007: 216). Significantly, as recently as April 2011 when they filled out their Census forms, 84% of the Irish population declared themselves to be Catholic (Central Statistics Office, 2012: 42). Furthermore, the highest percentage of those who said they had 'no religion' was in the 25-29 years age band (p.43). Those in the 45-59 age band, the age cohort with which this study is concerned, predominantly identified themselves as Catholic.

While there has been a significant shift in the extent to which the Catholic Church dominates Irish social and political life, traces of religious belief systems can still be felt in how people live their lives. While the "traditional Irish mother who selflessly devoted herself to her family and to the Church" (Inglis, 1998: 238) is no longer the norm, residues of old belief systems linger in individuals and in the social system. However, there are also signs that people's attitudes to the dominance of the Catholic Church have changed, as evidenced by the passing of legislation that legalised contraception and divorce (O'Connor, 1998; Bacik, 2004), by falling Church attendance figures (O'Mahony, 2010) and by the development of alternative (multidenominational) educational facilities. Catholicism is part of Irish people's historical and cultural legacy. It still influences how they live their lives but is not the dominant influence that it was prior to the 1980s.

## Women and the State

In its role as the provider of a legal framework, the Irish government initially introduced a Constitution and legislation which was clearly influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church and reflected a patriarchal, familist and gendered ideology. Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*, 1937, Article 41) enshrined the importance of the family and of women's role within the family as follows: The State guarantees "to guard with special care the institution of marriage, on which the Family is founded" (Article 41.3.1). This Article also "recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved" (Article 41.2.1). It states further that the state shall "endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home" (Article 41.2.2).

These Articles set the context in which the breadwinner model of family life is seen as the norm. In this model, the man, while not visible in the above wording, is the patriarch who goes out to work to provide for his family and the woman is a full time housewife and mother whose role is to take care of her husband and children. The Articles reflect a patriarchal ideology on women's roles and on normative family practices. They clearly identify marriage as the only foundation of the family (Bacik, 2004). The Article which banned divorce and the background to how it was changed will be discussed in the next chapter.

The laws on contraception also clearly reflected the influence of the Catholic Church on Irish legislation. Under the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1935, the advertising, importation and sale of contraceptives were forbidden in Ireland (Fitzgerald, 1973: 25). Unease about the ban on contraception had been growing from the 1960s (Ferriter, 2009). On the 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1971, a group of forty-seven Dublin feminists that included Mary Kenny, Nell Mc Cafferty and the late June Levine (who were journalists) decided to flout the law of 1935 and, amidst publicity, took the train to Belfast to purchase contraceptives and defy the Irish Customs and the Gardaí<sup>7</sup> with their purchases on returning to Dublin (Hussey,

---

<sup>7</sup> Gardaí are members of the Irish police force called An Garda Síochána, formed in 1922.

1993: 423). In the same year, the then senator Mary Robinson, who later became the first female President of Ireland, introduced her first private members Bill on contraception in Seanad Eireann<sup>8</sup>. The Bill was defeated (Ferriter, 2009).

In a land mark case, called the McGee case, in 1973, the Supreme Court ruled that people had a constitutional right to marital privacy. Mary Mc Gee, with others, challenged the ban on the importation of contraceptives (Considine and Dukelow, 2009). Mary McGee already had four children and had been advised by her doctors that it would be dangerous for her to have any more children. She and her husband decided to order contraceptives from England. The contraceptives were seized by the Customs when they were coming through the post. The McGees used the special position of the family as enshrined in the Constitution to argue that it was unconstitutional for the state to intrude in the privacy of their family. They won the case on that basis. This case forced the government to begin to draft legislation on contraception, but, as will be discussed below, it took another ten years for the legislation on contraception to be introduced.

The year 1973 is considered to have been a watershed year in the development of equality legislation for Irish women (Bacik, 2004). Ireland's entry into the European Economic Community (E.E.C) now the European Union (E U)<sup>9</sup> in that year resulted in legislation being introduced during the following decade on domestic violence, family home protection, equal status and employment equality. "The laws of the EU were generally viewed as offering greater scope for the achievement of equality by Irish women than what was available at national level" (Bacik, 2004:86). It is generally felt that Irish women benefited considerably in terms of equality by having access to European rather than solely Irish legislation.

---

<sup>8</sup> The Seanad is the upper house of the Irish Parliament. Dail Eireann is the lower house (Dooney and O'Toole,1998).

<sup>9</sup> The European Economic Community (E E C), also called the Common Market, was an international organization of six Western European countries created by the Treaty of Rome 1957. It was renamed the European Community (E.C.) with extended policies, to include social policies, under the Maastricht Treaty 1993. This E.C. became a pillar of the newly formed European Union (E U). Gradual enlargement over years included Eastern European countries. Membership now stands at 27 countries (Mc Cormick, 2008).

In 1979, legislation on contraception was finally passed but contained seriously restrictive conditions. Contraceptives were only made available by doctor's prescription and from a pharmacist to bona fide married couples for family planning purposes. In order to overcome these restrictions, family planning clinics were set up, mainly by groups in the women's movement. Contraceptives were offered in return for cash donations, rather than for sale. Medical doctors were also free to prescribe the contraceptive pill as a menstrual cycle regulator for women (Ferriter, 2009). It is suggested that doctors used the regulation of periods as a reason for prescribing the pill for women who requested such prescriptions. Ferriter (2009: 364) refers to an *Irish Times*<sup>10</sup> article which suggested that of the estimated 15,000 women in Ireland taking the contraceptive pill in 1968, 75% used it for social reasons. This was despite the fact that the Catholic Church saw the use of artificial means of birth control as morally wrong (O'Connor, 1998). As well as contraceptives being prescribed by doctors, they were also smuggled into the country so that, by a variety of means, many Irish people were beginning to gain access to artificial means of contraception (Tovey and Share, 2000; Ferriter, 2009).

However, the consequence of the lack of information and problems in accessing contraceptives led to a range of difficulties for women. Women who became pregnant outside of marriage faced very difficult choices. They either had to get married very quickly in order to retain respectability (McCafferty, 2010), or they had to hide their pregnancies by going to mother and baby homes and giving their babies up for adoption (Hill, 2003), or they had to go to England for abortions (Hill, 2003; Bacik, 2004: 62). Raising a child as a single mother just was not done in Ireland prior to the 1970s and even into the 1980s (Hill, 2003; Inglis, 2003). State support for single mothers was only introduced in 1973.

The case of Ann Lovett illustrates the tragic consequences of the attitudes to unmarried motherhood which still prevailed in Ireland in the 1980s. In 1984 Ann Lovett, a sixteen year old school girl, was found dead with her new-born baby at a shrine in Granard, Co. Longford. That no one offered help or advice and that

---

<sup>10</sup> *The Irish Times* is an Irish daily (except Sunday) broadsheet newspaper of record. It was first published in 1859 ([www.irishtimes.ie/archives](http://www.irishtimes.ie/archives)).

she gave birth alone was indicative of the shame and stigma that surrounded unmarried motherhood at the time (Hill, 2003; McCafferty, 2010).

The case of Joanne Hayes, the woman who was at the centre of the ‘Kerry Babies’ case, provides yet another example of the attitudes to women who transgressed normative moral codes in Ireland in the 1980s. Joanne Hayes was a young woman who came from a farming background in County Kerry. She was working in a leisure centre in Tralee and was having an affair with a married man, Jeremiah Locke. She had a child with this man which she was raising in her family home. She became pregnant for a second time in 1983. When two dead babies were found within the space of a fortnight in 1984 in County Kerry, Joanne, who was in her early twenties at that time, was accused of having given birth to twins and of having murdered them. Joanne confessed to the crime but it was subsequently established that she had only confessed because of the pressure put on her by the investigating Gardai. According to Mc Cafferty (2010) the confession by Joanne was made after seven hours of interrogation.

In his account of the ‘Kerry Babies Case’, Inglis (2003) claims that “to understand Joanne Hayes, it is necessary to understand the position of women in Irish society, how they were seen and understood and the stories that were told about them” (p.8). The fact that such a story could be constructed and later defended in the tribunal was indicative of beliefs about ‘loose’ women who had children ‘out of wedlock’ and who had affairs with married men. The implication was that women who would behave in such an immoral fashion were also capable of murder and could be treated as murder suspects (Inglis, 2003).

The Kerry Babies Case attracted world-wide media attention and there was public anger in Ireland over the handling of the case by the Gardaí. An all-male tribunal was set up under Justice Kevin Lynch to inquire into the Gardaí’s conduct in the case (Mc Cafferty, 2010: 84). Problems then arose about how the tribunal itself was handling the case. The Minister for Justice at the time, Michael Noonan TD was forced to intervene in the process of the tribunal, stating that the cross-examination was ‘insensitive’, ‘very, very frightening’, ‘shameful’, ‘harrowing’ and ‘quite horrific’ and that the Tribunal “showed an

attitude to women's sexuality that needed to be examined" (Mc Cafferty, 2010: 120/121). The focus of the investigation had been on Joanne's sexual history rather than on the behaviour of the Gardai (Hill, 2003).

The now retired Detective Sergeant Gerry O'Carroll who was involved in the Kerry Babies Case investigation, in his book *The Sheriff. A Detective's Story*, written in 2007, still maintains that Joanne Hayes gave birth to twins. He admitted that she received a "gruelling and merciless cross-examination" (O'Carroll, 2007: 211) from the barristers acting for An Garda Siochana during the tribunal. He stated that details of her sexual relationship with the father of her daughter were examined "sometimes in a brutal and insensitive way" (p.211) that caused her to break down many times and at one stage Joanne had to be sedated.

Journalists, Nell McCafferty and Aine O'Connor, highlighted that Judge Lynch allowed a bizarre line of questioning of Joanne, for example, "did she love this man or love what this man or some other man was prepared to do with her" (Mc Cafferty, 2010: 161). Aine O'Connor, in one of a series of articles in the *Sunday Independent*<sup>11</sup> (28<sup>th</sup> November 1999), recounts Martin Kennedy's (barrister for the Gardaí) cross examination of Peggy Houlihan, who worked with Joanne and was called as a peripheral witness. Referring to an after works drink she had with Jeremiah Locke, he asked how much she had to drink and if her husband knew she was out drinking with a married man. Minutiae from Joanne's menstrual cycle to her most private feelings and thoughts were aired in an effort to prove that she was a 'loose woman' (O'Connor, 1999). Inglis (2003) describes the 1980s as a time when "young people were caught between remaining loyal to the Catholic vision and interpretation of life, and breaking free and creating a new meaning and identity" (p.9). He identifies Joanne Hayes as being a young woman caught in this transition.

During the transition from Catholic Ireland to contemporary Ireland, Mary Robinson becoming President in 1990 marked a further significant change in the perception of Irish women. Robinson was a prominent feminist and an activist on

---

<sup>11</sup> The *Sunday Independent* is Ireland's largest-selling Sunday newspaper, available in broadsheet format. It was founded in 1905.

women's issues. She was well known for her "frequent and successful challenges to the traditional conservatism of the state" (Hill, 2003: 234). Her election epitomised a trend in which new definitions of womanhood were emerging (Connolly and O'Toole, 2005). In her inaugural speech, President Robinson thanked "above all the women of Ireland, mná na hÉireann, who instead of rocking the cradle rocked the system..." (Hill, 2003: 235). It is noteworthy that the first piece of legislation President Robinson signed into law decriminalised rape within marriage. She stood for a new type of Ireland which would be more open, pluralist and tolerant (Hill, 2003: 234) and in which women could be perceived in a different, more publicly active and independent, way. While there were still felt to be some residues of traditional constructions of womanhood in Ireland, there were also significant changes towards more modern constructions of womanhood, as evidenced by Ireland being the first country to elect a feminist activist as President of the country (Hill, 2003).

### **Women, Work and the Economic System**

According to Clear (2001), there was a public construction of women in Ireland between 1922 and 1961 which gave priority to their household and familial function and discouraged them from working outside the home. The 1961 census records showed that 93.7% of married women were described as 'engaged in home duties' (Clear, 2001: 18). Clear uses the phrase 'women of the house' to refer to women who "had primary responsibility for the daily maintenance of a dwelling and of the lives of its members, through gathering and preparing food, organising the living space, looking after clothing, and often physically and culturally reproducing- bearing and rearing children- in addition to this work" (Clear, 2001: 12). This is the model of wife and mother that the women in this study would have grown up with.

This model had legislative support. The 'marriage ban' which prevented women from working in the civil service, local authorities, banks and health boards once they got married came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1933. Furthermore, the Conditions of Employment Bill 1935 gave power to the Minister for Industry to restrict the number of women employed in industry (Considine and Dukelow,

2009: 33). This decision was unopposed by the Trade Unions, except for the Irish Women's Workers Union, indicating a general acceptance among mainstream trade unionists of its provisions and an acceptance of strict limitations on independent economic opportunities for women. During the 1960s and up to the late 1970s it was the policy of the Industrial Development Authority (IDA)<sup>12</sup> to attract jobs for men, suggesting that these jobs would be full-time, well trained and well-paid. As Clear (2001) identified, there was a clear government policy, which seems to have been supported by the majority of the people, to prevent married women from working outside the home. This meant that available work was for men and for single women. The expectation in Ireland at the time was that most girls would spend a relatively short period of time in employment after leaving school, before getting married and giving up work to take care of children full-time (Barry, 2008).

The 1973 *Report of the Commission on the Status of Women* recommended that the ban on women working outside the home after marriage be removed. The lifting of the marriage bar and the development of equality legislation in the 1970s paved the way for an increase in the numbers of Irish married women in paid employment. The increase was also linked to better education, to having fewer children and to the need of the capitalist economy for more workers (O'Connor, 1998). The growth in jobs in the computer assembly field and in the service sector, in particular, meant that there were more jobs for women (Coulter, 1997: 278).

While laws preventing married women from working in paid employment were removed, the Irish government provided very little in the way of state childcare to facilitate mothers of young children to take up employment outside the home. There seems to have been a belief that childcare was the responsibility of families and that, apart from providing a Child Benefit payment, the state did not have a responsibility to provide childcare (O'Connor, 1998). Despite the lack of

---

<sup>12</sup> The Industrial Development Authority was established in 1949 with responsibility for industrial development in Ireland. Its role changed in the late 1950s and the 1960s to the reform and industrialisation of the economy. Since 1994, the Authority is called the Industrial Development Agency (Ireland) or IDA Ireland with responsibility for the encouragement of foreign investment and for economic growth. It is funded by the Irish Government under the National Development Plan 2007-2013 (idaireland.ie).

childcare, there was a dramatic increase in the number of married Irish women in employment between 1971 and 1996. The figure increased from 7.5% in 1972 to 36.6% in 1996.

More recent statistics from the Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2011) show that the EU target for female employment was 60% by 2010. Ireland met this target in 2007 and 2008 but, due to the current recession, the figure dropped to 56.4% in 2010 (CSO, 2011). According to the CSO in 2011, “women’s annual income was around 70% of that earned by men in 2008, though after adjusting for time worked, women’s hourly earnings were around 90% of men’s” (CSO, 2011). The greatest proportion of women is employed in the education and health sectors. More women than men work part time, which affects the women’s earnings and their pension entitlements. Of particular significance for this study are the statistics for employment of women in the 45-59 years age groups. In 2009, 68% of women aged 45-54 were employed compared to 86.9% of men in the same age group. In the same year, 41.4% of women aged 55-64 were employed compared to 62.2% of men in the same age group (CSO, 2011).

Statistics on the employment and income situations of women are relevant because of the financial implications of separation for women in midlife. Writing in 1998, O’Connor stated that women in their forties and fifties in Ireland were less likely to be employed outside the home than their European counterparts (O’Connor, 1998: 40). The recent statistics (shown above) point to a marked increase in the number of married women in employment in midlife, but also show a disparity between the employment rates for men and women aged 45-64 years in Ireland. This latter point is relevant for women who separate in midlife and who may have out of date work skills or inadequate pension provision due to having spent a large portion of their adult working lives as full time housewives and mothers, as was the practice when they were raising their children.

## **Social Construction of Marriage and Heterosexual Relationships**

According to O'Connor (1998), essentialism was a key element in Irish ideology about what it was to be male or female and how relations between the sexes were expected to be conducted. As illustrated already, prior to the 1970s a patriarchal system operated within the Catholic Church and was mirrored by the state in Ireland in that "it was men's values which defined women's lives" (O'Connor, 1998: 81). Male Church leaders and male politicians drafted rules and laws which dictated the perimeters of women's lives. Men and women lived in very separate worlds and gained status in very different ways. Men lived in and gained status in the public arena of work, sport and politics. Women were "visible but silent" (Clear, 2001: 46). They lived in the private sphere. Many dominated at home by providing care and affection to children and to men (Inglis, 1998). Mothers were placed at the centre of family morality and provided unpaid care in return for financial support (O'Connor, 1998).

Prior to the 1980s, marriage rates in Ireland were relatively low (Kennedy, 2001) and there were large numbers of bachelors and spinsters. This related largely to inheritance practices which dictated that only one son could inherit the family farm, meaning that other family members either had to remain unmarried or had to emigrate. Up to the 1970s, Ireland had been predominantly a rural based society and marriage had been closely linked to the provision of a male heir (Tovey and Share, 2000). However, from the 1960s and 1970s onwards different images of marriage and of relationships between men and women, other than those contracted for economic reasons or for reasons to do with land, had begun to emerge.

At this time, love rather than money began to be seen as the basis for marriage. Beale (1987) argued that by the mid 1980s this ideology of marriage based on love had also been accepted by the Catholic Church. Marriage was re-construed as involving a companionate type relationship rather than a traditional instrumental type relationship (Kiely, 1989). Relationships based on love were construed as involving personal commitment and sexual fidelity, open and honest communication and emotional closeness (O'Connor, 1998). Given that the

women in this study married between 1974 and 1987, this is the type of marital relationship that they might have expected to experience.

Irish television broadcasting began in 1961 and it had an impact on making different images of women available, other than those presented by the Church. Foreign programmes challenged the natural inevitability of women's position in society (O'Connor, 1998). The advent of television also played a key role in allowing women's voices to be heard and in highlighting the real difficulties that some women experienced within the privacy of their homes. Stories began to be told on radio talk shows (Gay Byrne Show, Gerry Ryan Show<sup>13</sup>) about the experience of unmarried mothers, about unhappy marriages and about domestic violence (Ferriter, 2009). The ideal of lifelong happy marriage began to be questioned. The reality of 'Irish style divorces' as evidenced by the number of deserted wives began to be recognised.

By the end of the twentieth century, Ireland had been through a period of rapid modernisation and liberalisation. The influence of the Catholic Church was no longer the primary influence on the legislation enacted in the country. Women had reduced the size of their families. Married women were going out to work in increasing numbers. Married women were returning to education at an increasing rate. Notwithstanding these changes, O'Connor argued that women's destinies still lay in subsuming their identity to that of their families' because "within an Irish cultural tradition the family is an important symbol of collective identity, unity and security" (O'Connor, 1998: 89). O'Connor (1998) claimed that family was still the basic unit in Irish society and that women were still seen as central to the life of families. The notion of individual autonomy for women was seen to run counter to a culture that "thrives on social obligation and strong notions of kin, community, connections and social bonds" (O'Connor, 1998: 103). Notions of obligation to provide care for kin applied in particular to women.

---

<sup>13</sup> The Gay Byrne and Gerry Ryan radio programmes dealt with controversial topical and social issues of life. Women engaged with their programmes and they became influential in Irish social change.

More recently, Margret Fine Davis (2011) published a study on attitudes to family formation in Ireland. Her findings provide evidence of some profound changes in attitudes to relationships between males and females and to family formation in Ireland. She found widespread support among both men and women for married women working outside the home. She found widespread support for couples living together. She found support for couples having children without being married. A majority of participants in the survey felt that having a child was a much greater commitment than getting married. However, Fine Davis (2011) also found that, in some respects, attitudes had not changed. Men still saw women as having primary responsibility for children and for domestic chores. This is similar to the findings in a study by McGinnity and Russell (2008) on *The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment among Women and Men in Ireland* which reported that, even where both parents were employed full-time, women still did more of the household and childcare chores than the men.

Irish people are continuing to get married in large numbers. The Census 2011 results show that the proportion of married people as a percentage of the adult population increased to 45.9% in 2011 from 45.1% in 2006 (CSO, 2012). In popular culture, marriage is still presented as an 'ideal' state for both men and women. Weddings appear to be increasingly big business. There has been a proliferation of glossy magazines (e.g. Brides) and television reality shows about weddings (Don't tell the bride) and wedding planners (e.g "Fronk"). Despite the increasing rate of cohabitation prior to marriage (CSO, 2012), marriage as an institution and weddings as a rite of passage into that institution show no sign of abating in Ireland.

The overall conclusion on the current social construction of heterosexual relationships would seem to be that, while there have been some changes in how relationships between males and females are construed in Ireland, traces of traditional gender roles remain. Inglis (2008) sums up the change in Irish women by stating that they have gone from saying "Lord, I am not worthy"<sup>14</sup> to "because

---

<sup>14</sup> "Lord, I am not worthy to receive Thee under my roof. Say but the word and my soul shall be healed" is a prayer said before the reception of the Eucharist at Mass seeking forgiveness for sin. Sin renders a person unworthy to receive Communion.

you're worth it" (a line from an advertisement for Elvive beauty products). However, he also suggests that "[h]undreds of years of self deprecation...could not be overturned in one or two generations" (p.137). Likewise, hundreds of years of traditional gender roles could not be overturned in a generation. In much the same way as residues of Catholicism are still present in Irish people's souls, traditional notions of female roles and male roles form part of how Irish women and men are still viewed and how they view each other.

### **The Women's Movement**

According to O'Connor (1998), the women's movement was instrumental in leading to a change in the collective consciousness about Irish women. It led to resistance to the invisibility and undervaluing of women. It led to recognition of the gap between the rhetoric about women's lives and the reality of the darker side of family life (O'Connor, 1998; Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2004). The 'contraceptive train' trip has already been mentioned, as has the significance of the election of Mary Robinson in 1990 as the first female President of Ireland.

The 'second wave of feminism' (Connolly and O'Toole, 2005) made its presence felt in Ireland in 1970 with the founding of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement. The needs of unmarried mothers, the need to decriminalise contraception, the existence of domestic violence and sexual abuse within families started to be spoken about. Services were established, largely championed by the women's movement, to meet these needs. For example, in 1971, Ally, a family placement service for pregnant women was set up. Family Planning Services was founded in 1972, as was Cherish, a service which provided advice and support to single mothers. AIM, a pressure group concerned with providing information and legal advice to women was founded. Another group, Adapt, offered support for deserted parents. Women's Aid opened refuges for victims of domestic violence. A Rape Crisis Centre was established (Hill, 2003; Connolly and O'Toole, 2005). These services were established largely by women who were pushing for greater choice and control for all women. Many of the services are still in existence.

While the majority of Irish women may not have been directly involved in the activities of the Irish Women's Liberation Movement (Connolly and O'Toole, 2005), the role of feminists in highlighting the position of women shifted the taken-for-granted essentialist assumptions about the position of women in Ireland which had previously been dominant. The unequal treatment of women was clearly identified and attempts were made to equalise women's opportunities (Hill, 2003). In a very real sense, all Irish women gained from the activities of the women's movement.

## **Conclusion**

Five key aspects of Irish society were identified as being important to an understanding of Irish women who were born in the 1950s and early 1960s: the Catholic Church, the state, the economic system, the cultural and social construction of heterosexual relationships, and the women's movement (O'Connor, 1998). Various studies were reviewed which deal with the lives of Irish women (O'Hara, 1997; Inglis, 1998, 2003, 2008; O'Connor, 1998; Bacik, 2004; Connolly and O'Toole, 2005; Barry, 2008) and detail the events and structures that have shaped women's lives in Ireland and the continuities and the changes that have occurred over the sixty years from 1950-2010.

The dominance of Catholic social teaching in Ireland on how marriage, family life and women's roles were defined is particularly relevant for this study. The 1950s and 1960s was an era when family needs were prioritised over individual needs, when mothers were expected to sacrifice themselves for their children and their husbands, when men were expected to be dominant over women, when married women were not expected to work outside the home, when artificial contraception was illegal and when marriage was seen as a lifelong commitment with no option for divorce. Ideologies of patriarchy and familism prevailed. There was very little emphasis on upholding the rights of individuals. There was a presumption that the needs of individuals would be met within families and that the male bread winner model was the best model for a stable society.

Beginning in the 1970s, the influence of the Catholic Church on framing state legislation began to wane and advances began to be made in terms of greater equality for Irish women. This came about initially, largely, as a result of Ireland's entry into the E.U. and as result of the various campaigns run by the Irish Women's Liberation Movement. Irish women gained access to legalised contraception, resulting in them having fewer children than previous generations. More women had access to second and third level education and to careers and employment outside the home, thereby attaining a status and an income independent of their husbands. Expectations of marriage shifted from an economic base to an affective base. However, residues of Catholic belief systems about the sanctity of marriage and family remained, as did residues of patriarchal beliefs about gender role typing.

This chapter has provided the specific historical and social context in which the women who participated in this study grew up, got married and raised their children. It is in this context that they make sense of and adapt to marital separation.

## CHAPTER 3:

### UNDERSTANDING SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

#### Introduction

This chapter will be structured around reviewing literature which will inform discussion on each of the areas with which the research questions are concerned. The first section, similar to the previous chapter, will review material aimed at exploring the first research question, about the factors that influence how separation is experienced in Ireland. It will begin by reviewing literature on the background to the introduction of divorce in Ireland (Dillon, 1993; Burley and Regan, 2002; Hill, 2003) and will also focus on social and legal studies (Coulter, 2008; Lunn *et al.*, 2009; Mahon and Moore, 2011) which have been conducted into separation in Ireland. For comparative purposes, there will be a brief discussion of how divorce legislation was introduced in Ireland, compared to how it was introduced and altered in the U.K. and U.S.A. The second section will review national (McDonnell, 1999; O'Connor, 2001; McKeown *et al.*, 2003) and international literature (Smart, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Amato, 2000; Dronkers *et al.*, 2006; Lowenstein, 2007), from predominantly sociological and psychological studies, on the processes that are thought to lead to separation. The third section will focus on material (Wineman, 1999; Carter and McGoldrick, 2005) dealing with the losses and gains experienced by women as they go through stages entailed in the transition process involved in separating. The fourth section will deal with the ways in which women cope with and re-configure their lives and their relationships following separation (Smart, 2007). Research on the impact of separation on children is presented as part of this section. The next piece, on the experiences of initiators and non-initiators of separation, (Sakraida, 2005) is not related to a specific research question, but is a topic that is commonly addressed in the literature on separation and divorce and is seen as being a possible influence on how women may experience separation.

As mentioned, the study is concerned with separation rather than divorce and the primary objective is to explore experiences in the initial years after the breakdown of a marriage rather than to focus on the longer term outcomes.

However, most international literature from the U.S.A., U.K. and Australia (Smart, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Amato, 2000; Lowenstein, 2007) deals with divorce rather than separation so, for the purposes of this literature review, material on both divorce and separation will be presented.

### **Irish Influences on Separation**

This review of literature will consist, for the most part, of research carried out since 1980. This thirty years represents the period in Ireland when marital separation came into the public arena, as evidenced by the setting up of the Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown in 1984, by the first referendum on divorce in 1986, by the passing of the Judicial Separation Act in 1989, by the second divorce referendum in 1995 and by the introduction of divorce legislation in 1996.

### **Background to Divorce Referendum 1986**

Divorce had not always been illegal in Ireland. The ban was introduced in the 1937 Constitution which stated that “No law shall be enacted providing for the dissolution of marriage” (Article 41.3.1). The Constitution was inspired by Eamon DeValera, the head of government at the time, who wished to “separate Republican Ireland from its colonial English past with the creation of a Catholic state for a Catholic people” (Burley and Regan, 2002). Having no divorce in Ireland was part of this vision of what it was to be Irish, as opposed to English, and what it was to be Catholic rather than Protestant. It took almost fifty years for the reality of marriage breakdown to be acknowledged and for the need for divorce to be debated publicly (Hill, 2003).

The first public acknowledgement of the need to legislate for divorce in Ireland was the establishment by the government of the Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown in 1984. The Committee’s Report (1985) stated that

what motivated the Oireachtas to establish the Committee were firstly the need to protect family life and secondly a growing awareness of marriage breakdown as a social reality, giving rise to social, economic and legal

problems which required detailed examination and intervention by the State, if necessary, by legal or constitutional means (p.27).

It is in keeping with the policy at the time that protecting family life was mentioned as the primary objective of the Committee. The Committee acknowledged that there were “many thousands of couples who find themselves in a legal limbo – tied into a marriage that in social reality no longer exists” (1985: 29). The Committee recommended that a referendum be held to amend the Constitution. It suggested that a form of ‘no fault’ divorce, which would avoid some of the negative impacts of divorce found in other countries, be put to the electorate for their consideration. The government adopted the recommendation even though the main opposition party did not agree with the proposal (Burley and Regan, 2002: 205). The first referendum to amend the Constitution and legalise divorce was announced by the Taoiseach, Garret Fitzgerald, TD, on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1986.

Initial polls showed support for the amendment and that a majority of people were prepared to consider the possibility of legalising divorce (Whelan and Fahey, 1994) but as the campaign progressed it became clear that support was dropping (Dillon, 1993; Burley and Regan, 2002). The main opposition to divorce was led by a group called the Anti-Divorce Group. This was a group of Catholic lay people (as opposed to clergy) which only formed after the referendum was announced. The primary spokesman for the group was William Binchy, a well-known barrister. The Catholic hierarchy did not take part in the campaign at an official level although some individual bishops and priests addressed the matter in Episcopal letters and in sermons at Sunday Masses (Dillon, 1993; Hill, 2003).

The argument advanced by people in the ‘no’ campaign was that no human authority could change what God had ordained. ‘What God has joined together, let no man put assunder’. Marriage was seen, first and foremost, as a sacrament, with God at its centre. Marriage was perceived as being sacred and not just a civil contract, which could be entered into and dissolved according to the laws of the State. Marriage was seen as the basis of the family, which was, in turn, seen as the basis of social order in society. The fear expressed was that divorce would

undermine the stability of the family which Irish people, as per their Constitution, held to be sacred. Binchy (1984) stated that “the availability of divorce would tend to increase the demand for it and contribute to the lessening of efforts to find alternative solutions” (p.8). The fear was that divorce would destabilise marriages and that couples would not put sufficient effort into trying to solve marital difficulties.

The ‘no’ campaigners did not deny that couples separated, but their contention was that divorce would benefit a second family at the expense of a first family. Research findings from other countries were presented to support this argument (Binchy, 1984). The concern was that women and children would not be financially provided for as a result of divorce and that they would lose their inheritance rights. Alice Glenn, who was a right-wing Catholic politician between 1981 and 1987, described women voting for divorce being like “turkeys voting for Christmas”. As in most debates, the ‘no’ campaigners were not entirely wrong (Burley and Regan, 2002). As the law stood in the early 1980s, rural women would have had no entitlement to the family farm in the event of being divorced against their will. It was suggested that before women would vote for divorce, property law reforms would have to be enacted (Dillon, 1993). These changes were made before the subsequent divorce referendum in 1995.

As it transpired, the 1986 referendum was rejected by 64% of the electorate. This amounted to an embarrassing defeat by a 2 to 1 majority for the Government-backed proposal (Burley and Regan, 2002). Almost 63% of the electorate had turned out to vote. The explanation put forward for the ‘no’ vote was that while Ireland had modernised economically in the 1960s and 1970s, in the moral domain it still resembled a more traditional society (Hill, 2003). The referendum results show a very strong rural vote in opposition to the introduction of divorce. Concern about financial security for women and about their legal entitlement to land were some of the issues which resulted in the vast majority of Irish people voting ‘no’ to divorce in 1986. Dillon also claimed that legalising divorce “would penetrate directly the bedrock of Irish values” (Dillon, 1993: 30) and that Irish people, in 1986, were not ready to make that transition to a more liberal set of values about marriage and family.

### **The Judicial Separation and Family Law Act, 1989**

The Government still had to deal with the ambiguous position of the many people who were separated but had no access to any legal arrangements to regularise their situations. In 1989, the Judicial Separation and Family Law Act which enabled couples to legally separate, but not to re-marry, was introduced. This legislation is still very much in use and is often the first legal remedy which couples in Ireland utilise to legalise their affairs following separation (Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011).

The grounds for a Judicial Separation are as follows: adultery by the respondent; desertion for at least one year; behaviour with which the applicant cannot reasonably be expected to live; that spouses have lived apart for one year, if they both agree to the separation and for three years, if there is not agreement to separate; that the marriage is broken down to the degree that satisfies the Court and that a normal marriage relationship between the spouses has not existed for at least a year (Shatter, 1997).

Financial protection for women and children, in the form of maintenance payments, are covered under this Act. The Court also has to be satisfied that the religious, physical, social, moral and intellectual welfare of children are provided for, on a permanent basis, before a Separation Order is issued. The Separation Order is a legally binding contract to which both parties agree. Burley and Regan (2002) described this Act as being “a limited form of back door divorce” (p. 205) when it was introduced in 1989 in that it contained many of the provisions of divorce legislation in other countries. According to Whelan and Fahey (1994) there was very little opposition to this legislation when it was going through the Dáil<sup>15</sup>. However, Burley and Regan (2002) identified that this legislation had several weaknesses in that it involved long delays for many applicants and it was very expensive.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Dáil, Dáil Eireann, is the lower house of the Irish parliament. The upper house is called the Seanad (Senate). The present Dáil was created under the 1937 Constitution and has 166 deputies. There is one deputy for every 20,000 – 30,000 of the population, elected in general election every five years (Dooney and O’Toole, 1998).

The expectation was that once divorce was introduced in 1997 that the legislation on separation would be used less often (Coulter, 2008). As will be discussed later, this has not turned out to be the case. Rather than waiting the required four years before applying for divorce, many Irish couples apply for a separation, in the interim, in order to sort out arrangements about property, maintenance and access to children. The arrangements made under judicial separation legislation often then become a blueprint for subsequent divorce settlements and amount to a two-step legal process in how divorce is handled in Ireland (Coulter, 2008). The legal procedures play a key role in how separation is experienced and form part of the discussion in the analysis chapters which follow.

### **Second Referendum on Divorce 1995**

In 1992 the Government produced a White Paper on Marital Breakdown. It estimated that the number of separated couples had doubled since 1986 and that the number of women claiming deserted wives benefits had trebled. There was pressure on the government from groups representing separated people to hold another referendum on divorce. In order to get all-party agreement before attempting to hold another referendum, some of the concerns raised in the first referendum about the financial situation of the 'first' family were addressed and the grounds on which divorce could be obtained were made 'extremely restrictive' (Burley and Regan, 2002: 207).

In November 1995, the second referendum on divorce was held. The reality of judicial separation had been accepted by the enactment of the 1989 Act and the government argued for divorce on the, mainly pragmatic grounds, that so many people were already separated and in second relationships and that their situations needed to be legalised. As mentioned, assurances were given that any divorce legislation introduced would ensure that proper provision was made for the women and children in 'first' families. By November 1995 when the second referendum on divorce took place, Ireland was a very different place (Coulter, 1997). There were more single mothers, more women in the workforce, more women in third level education and religious observance had dropped (Coulter, 1997). There had also been a number of high profile scandals involving clergymen in the intervening decade, as also detailed in the previous chapter. A

different attitude to the Catholic Church prevailed because of these clerical scandals.

Notwithstanding the changes that had taken place in Irish society in the intervening years, heated debates again took place, as in 1986, during the referendum campaign. “A campaign of fear” (Burley and Regan, 2002: 207) was again launched in opposition to divorce. Hill (2003) stated that “the anti-divorce groups warned that the ‘individualism’ of feminists and other liberals represented a real threat to Irish morality” (p.190). Anti-Divorce Campaign posters read “hello divorce...bye bye daddy”. Labour Party posters in favour of divorce read “banning divorce does not stop marital breakdown” (Irish Election Literature 1995).

Pre referendum debates on the divorce issue led to disquiet between the Catholic Church and State leaders. Just three days before the voting took place, Dr. Dermot Clifford, Archbishop of Cashel, stated in a pastoral letter that divorced people who re-marry are likely to divorce again. This remark was challenged by Proinsias de Rossa, TD and Minister for Social Welfare, as being inaccurate information. The Archbishop had based his statement on British research (Catholic World News 26 June 1997). The Minister for Finance, Ruairi Quinn, TD, compared Professor William Binchy of the Anti-Divorce Campaign to Hitler, accusing him of using his intellect to mislead the electorate on issues involved in the divorce debate. The ministers subsequently apologised for their remarks.

The referendum to amend the constitutional ban on divorce was passed with only 50.28% voting in favour of divorce. This was the smallest majority that any amendment has ever been passed by in the State (Mc Gréil, 1997: 31; Considine and Dukelow, 2009: 71). The turnout of voters was 61.94 per cent. The referendum result was challenged in the High Court and in the Supreme Court which caused a delay of a further fifteen months before divorce legislation was finally passed.

The Family Law (Divorce) Act (1996) finally came into operation in February 1997. The four grounds on which divorce can be granted under the Act include that a couple have lived apart for four of the previous five years; that there is no prospect of a reconciliation; that provision is made for the spouses and children and that any further conditions imposed by the Court are complied with (Shatter, 1997; Nestor, 2006).

The tiny majority in favour of legalising divorce indicates that in 1995 there was still a sizeable minority of people in Ireland who were against removing the ban on divorce. There was also a clear rural-urban split in how votes were cast, with a majority of voters in rural areas firmly in opposition to divorce (Burley and Regan, 2002). The campaigns that were run in opposition to the two referenda on divorce illustrate the depth of feeling and fear about marriage breakdown and divorce in Ireland that was felt by many people less than fifteen years ago. At the same time, there were some high profile examples of separated people in public life, for example Connor Cruise O'Brien who was a government Minister and Bertie Ahern who was the Taoiseach (Prime Minister). Their separated status did not appear to be an issue. Yet for 'ordinary' people separation was an issue, as evidenced by the numbers who voted against divorce. This slightly paradoxical situation whereby to be separated/divorced was to be a 'failure' on the one hand, while on the other hand, the separated status of some high profile people was unremarkable, is the backdrop against which separation is set in Ireland.

### **Irish Socio - Demographic Trends**

According to an ESRI study (Lunn *et al.*, 2009), in which the Census figures from 1986-2006 were analysed, the rate of marital breakdown in Ireland is difficult to measure. The report identifies that there are gaps between the rates of marital breakdown and court records on the rates of judicial separation and divorce. More people identify themselves as being separated in their Census returns than appear in court records. This may be as a result of a practice in Ireland whereby people separate but do not always proceed to legalise their separations (Coulter, 2008).

The recently published statistics from the 2011 Census (CSO, 2012:23) show that the total number of people separated and divorced in Ireland in 2011 was 203,964. This represents an increase in the rate of marital breakdown from 8.7 per cent in 2006 to 9.7 percent in 2011. This rate is calculated as the number of separated and divorced persons as a proportion of those who were ever married. The highest rates of separation and divorce were found in the cities, with Limerick City having the highest rate at 13.5 per cent and Galway City having the lowest rate at 7.5 per cent. Breaking down the total number separated and divorced further shows that the number of people divorced was 87,770. This figure has increased significantly from 35,059 in 2002 and 59,500 in 2006. The numbers separated increased only marginally from 107,263 in 2006 to 116,194 in 2011. The suggestion is that the figure for those separated reflects a progression of people from separation to divorce, combined with new people becoming separated (CSO, 2012:23). “[B]etween 1986 and 2006, the total number of people in Ireland whose marriages have broken down increased five-fold, from 40,000 in 1986 to just under 200,000 in 2006 (of the latter, 36,000 were non-nationals)” (Lunn, *et al.*, 2009:45) and to 203,960 in 2011. While the figures show a significant increase over a twenty-five year period, they are still relatively low by international standards.

Comparative figures for marriage breakdown rates in different countries are difficult to arrive at because several measures are used to compute the figures (de Vaus, 2004; Lunn *et al.*, 2009). According to de Vaus (2004) “divorce rates between countries are most readily compared using crude divorce rates” (p.212). The crude divorce rate in any given year is calculated as the number of divorces for every 1,000 of the population. Using this measure, the crude divorce rate for Ireland in 2009 was 0.7, compared to a rate of 2.0 in the U.K., 2.7 in Denmark, and 2.3 in Germany ([www.eurostat.ec.europa.eu](http://www.eurostat.ec.europa.eu)). The rate of divorce in the USA in 2009 was 3.4 ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The country with the closest rate of divorce to Ireland was Italy at 0.9. As indicated above, the divorce rate in Ireland is only part of the rate of marital breakdown because of the numbers separated but not divorced. A similar situation may be the case in Italy where couples must be separated for three years before they can divorce. Taking all the difficulties with comparing divorce rates between countries into account, the conclusion Lunn *et*

*al.* (2009) arrived at is that “on a like-for-like basis, Ireland would still emerge in a low position in European comparisons of marital breakdown” (p.46). The figures show that separation and divorce are still less common experiences in Ireland than in other countries.

Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that the Irish figures show a significant increase in the percentages of people that separate in the forty plus age groups (CSO, 2012). As highlighted in the Introduction, the CSO report shows that the rate of separation begins when people are in their late twenties and peaks at age forty-eight. Appendix 4 contains a marital status population pyramid (CSO, 2012:8) which shows the population aged 15-95 by single year of age and marital status. This pyramid shows very clearly the proportion of marriages that end in separation/divorce and that separation/divorce most frequently occurs for people aged between forty-five and fifty four.

Lunn *et al.* (2009) also found that more women than men reported themselves to be separated. The conclusion they drew was that men who were separated were more likely to identify themselves as ‘single’ rather than ‘separated’. This raises questions about how Irish women identify themselves following separation and will be discussed further later. According to the highlights from Census 2011, there are 88,918 men separated or divorced, while there are 115,046 women separated or divorced. The data on re-marriage shows that 24,079 men have re-married compared to 18,881 women. The higher rate of re-marriage by men goes some way to explaining the disparity in figures between the rate of female separation and the rate of male separation.

Overall, the figures quoted show that separation is currently a significant aspect of life for many Irish families. It is particularly significant for people in their forties and fifties, especially for women who do not re-partner or re-marry and may be facing into old age on their own.

### **Social Correlates of Marriage Breakdown in Ireland**

In their analysis of the 1986-2006 Census figures, Lunn *et al.* (2009) investigated the links between a range of social correlates and marital breakdown. As well as considering age and gender, as discussed already, they also investigated if significant links could be found between marriage breakdown and education, social class, religion and regional location. As the Lunn *et al.* (2009) study deals solely with quantitative data, there is very little discursive material included in this summary of their publication.

In relation to education and social class, Lunn *et al.* (2009) found that marital breakdown is most likely among those who work in semi or unskilled manual occupations and those who have low levels of educational attainment. The exceptions to this finding are “female graduates in their fifties who have the highest risk of marital breakdown” (p.51). This is a particularly pertinent finding for this study given the age group and class characteristics with which it is concerned. As will be described in the methodology chapter, most of the participants in this study had obtained third-level qualifications either as school leavers or during the course of their marriages.

In relation to religion, Lunn *et al.* (2009) found the highest risk of marital breakdown among those with no religious affiliation. Census 2011 found that the proportion of people who said they had ‘no religion’ has increased from 83,500 in 2006 to 269,800 in 2011, but that these respondents were more likely to be found in the younger age groups, between 25-29 years of age. It may be pertinent to this study to discuss the role played by religious beliefs in the experience of Irish women who separate.

In relation to where separated people were living, Lunn *et al.* (2009) found that a higher proportion of women who are separated live in Dublin, but that “the likelihood of marital separation in all regions outside the capital is moving closer to that recorded in Dublin” (p.54). As mentioned, Census 2011 shows that separation and divorce rates are highest in Limerick City and lowest in Galway County. The type of question this finding raises is whether separation is

experienced differently depending on whether the woman lives in an urban or a rural district.

Lunn *et al.* (2009) also investigated whether there were discernible differences between people who proceeded to divorce and people who just remained separated. Those in professional occupations were found to be more likely to divorce. In relation to partnership after marital breakdown, they found that the dominant pattern is that a majority of people have not re-partnered, especially women. Sixty per cent of women of all ages are not in relationships while 50% of men are not in relationships. Of those who have re-partnered, cohabitation is the preferred form of partnership, particularly for women. As mentioned, more recent statistics show an increasing trend towards re-marriage, particularly in the case of men.

The overall conclusions that Lunn *et al.* (2009) came to were that Ireland still uses a patchwork of legal remedies, from legal separations to full divorce, in dealing with relationship and marital breakdown. They commented that the rate of “marital breakdown has increased considerably since the 1980s” (p.38). They also found that there is a strong cohort effect related to age, educational attainment and social background which influenced which sections of the Irish population were most likely to separate between 1986 and 2006.

The objective of this thesis is not to establish linear causal relationships between different social correlates and the risk and consequences of marital breakdown. The objective is to provide rich descriptions of what the experience of separation feels like for Irish women who separate in midlife. Nevertheless, a number of the findings of this ESRI report are particularly relevant for this study. The finding that female graduates in their fifties are more likely to separate confirms that separation in midlife is a significant phenomenon in Ireland and that women who separate in midlife are more likely to have a third level qualification. That these women are more likely to be living in Dublin and not to be involved in new relationships are also significant for what their lives are like following separation. There are clear financial and care implications for having increasing

numbers of people living alone into old age. The relevance of these findings and the possible reasons for them will be discussed later.

### **Studies on Irish Family Law Cases**

Dr Carol Coulter, Legal Affairs Correspondent for *The Irish Times*<sup>16</sup>, spent a year, from 2006 to 2007, attending family law cases in the Circuit Court in Dublin. The objective of her study was to observe how decisions were made in practice on family law applications (Coulter, 2008). The findings of her study show that agreements between the parties are reached in 91% of cases. Female applicants for divorce outnumber male applicants by 58% to 42% while female applicants for judicial separations outnumber males by 82% to 18%. Applications were made by couples in all age groups. Issues to do with children emerged as the most contentious issues. The family home was sold only in a minority of cases. Maintenance for dependant children was normally paid by the husband, even where a wife was working, while maintenance for a spouse without dependent children was rarely paid. Coulter (2008) suggests that the reason so many Irish women initiate proceedings for judicial separations is because they cannot wait four years to have arrangements made about ownership of the family home, about custody, access and maintenance for children.

In a study on post-separation parenting in which they analysed court decisions in eighty-seven cases, Mahon and Moore (2011) found, as had Coulter (2008), that it was very rare for maintenance to be awarded to separating wives; maintenance was only awarded to wives in 2 out of the 87 cases observed. The women tended to get the family home instead of maintenance. They concluded that “[t]here is little compensatory or rehabilitative support for ex-wives” (p.81). Compensatory support refers to a model whereby women are compensated for loss of earnings due to household and childcare responsibilities during the marriage. From the figures given, it would appear that this model is being eroded (Mahon and Moore, 2011). Rehabilitative support refers to a model whereby maintenance is

---

<sup>16</sup> As mentioned in footnote 10, *the Irish Times* is an Irish daily (except Sunday) broadsheet newspaper. It may be seen to be politically liberal and progressive. *The Irish Times* is considered to be a newspaper of record (O’Brien, 2008). The newspaper has a current readership of 310,000 ([www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)).

given for a few years in order to help a woman find her feet financially, but after that period that the expectation is that she should be able to support herself. This topic also appears in the findings from research in other countries which will be discussed later in this chapter.

As part of the Mahon and Moore study, Moore did a doctoral study in which she set out to explore how parenting relationships changed in the aftermath of separation and divorce. She interviewed thirty-nine people who had separated, as well as a small number of solicitors. She devised a typology of separating couples which she termed (1) egalitarians (2) involved but constrained parents (3) involved but stressed couples (4) aggrieved parents and (5) excluded fathers (Moore, 2010: 4). Her overall finding was that dominant sociological theories on democratisation and individualisation in families over-emphasised people's freedom to choose different family roles and practices. She found that changing family practices following separation were better understood by focussing on continuity with how relationships and roles had been negotiated prior to separation rather than by focussing on theories which emphasised the importance of individual choice. She found some evidence to support the individualisation and democratisation thesis but more evidence to support theories which emphasised that traditionally gendered practices were still very much in evidence and largely dictated how relationships were constructed following separation. These are aspects which are also of concern in this study and they will be discussed more fully when discussing the theoretical concepts that underpin it.

The findings that women tended to stay in the family home and that women without dependant children tended not to be paid maintenance (Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011) have implications for the financial situation of women who separate in midlife, in particular for women who may not have worked outside the home or women who may have worked part time due to different care responsibilities. These matters will be taken up again when reviewing findings from international research and when analysing the primary data in this study.

## **Divorce Legislation in the U.S.A. and in the U.K.**

The history of divorce legislation in for example, the U.S.A. and the U.K. highlights differences in attitudes to divorce in those countries, compared to the attitudes in evidence when divorce was being introduced into Ireland. Examples of divorce legislation in other countries also highlight differences in the specificities of divorce arrangements in Ireland for example, the absence of the possibility of a 'clean break' and the four years required before application for divorce can be considered in Irish legislation.

National statistics on divorce were compiled in the U.S.A. for the first time in 1887 (Berry, 1998). By 1900, most states had some form of divorce legislation in place. Almost all the legislation was based on proving that one person was at fault for the breakdown of the marriage. Between 1966 and 1976, the divorce rate doubled and continued to increase each year into the 1980s, when 50% of marriages ended in divorce. Despite the increasing divorce rate, "as late as the 1960s and 1970s, subtle social messages hinted that single adults, especially the divorced, were somehow not a normal part of society" (Berry, 1998: 10). By the 1980s, attitudes had changed somewhat and Ronald Reagan, a divorced man, was elected President. According to Carter and McGoldrick (2005), "in the 1980s, divorce reached the status of a normative event with a rate of 50% for first marriages and 61% for subsequent marriages" (p. 373).

Concern began to be expressed in the States in the 1980s that having to prove 'fault' was leading to an increase in conflict between spouses and was having a negative impact on children. There was a move towards no-fault divorce throughout the U.S. in the last twenty-five years and "the social stigmas that made divorce more difficult have disappeared or at least lessened" (Berry, 1998:12). As a consequence, far more help and support is now available for people going through divorce (Berry, 1998).

Smart (1999), in a paper entitled "Divorce in England 1950-2000: A Moral Tale", charts the changes in legislation and in attitudes to divorce in the U.K. She outlines similar changes to those described in the U.S., with an initial focus on

apportioning blame or fault for the breakdown of the marriage, followed by an acceptance that irretrievable breakdown of a relationship was sufficient grounds for divorce. Smart summarises the changes in attitudes underpinning the legislative changes by stating that “in the 1950s adulterous wives were demonised, and in the 1980s deadbeat dads were vilified, by the end of the century the main villain became conflict. Divorce was being transformed into a process designed to minimise conflict-for the sake of the children” (Smart, 1999: 12). The expectation was that parents would co-operate in carrying out their parenting responsibilities rather than engage in on-going conflict and bitterness.

There was also a move in the U.K. towards legislation that provided for a ‘clean break’ in terms of financial and property settlements for divorcing couples. Irish divorce legislation does not allow for a clean break. The agreements reached are not ‘full and final’. The option is open to spouses to return to court to vary Orders at any time in the future. There is some debate in legal circles (Martin, 2002) that the absence of a clean break results in proceedings being more drawn out than is beneficial or fair for couples who are separating and prevents them from being able to move on with their lives. This may be a debate for a future time if/when changes are being made to the current divorce legislation.

Burley and Regan (2002) point to how different the history of family law reform was in Ireland compared to other countries. They illustrate how the move from legislation based on proving fault to a form of no fault divorce was achieved in the U.S., in Australia and across Europe in relative ‘silence’ (p.204). The changes were made with little public debate and as a result of “internal processes driven by lawyers and the Attorney General” (p.204). Changes were made for pragmatic reasons and in an attempt to reduce some of the negative impacts of fault-based divorce laws. That there was no such ‘silence’ when reforming family law in Ireland illustrates that a very different context for divorce existed in Ireland up to 1995 than that which existed in other countries.

## **Processes Leading to Separation**

The review of literature in this section aims to begin to answer the second research question of this study about the key contributory processes that have been found to lead to separation in midlife. Structural changes in society, difficulties in interpersonal relationships and difficulties in individual personalities are most often cited as the ‘causes’ of marriage breakdown (Smart, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Amato, 2000; Lowenstein, 2007). As this dissertation is being written primarily from a sociological rather than a psychological perspective, literature on the changes in society which impact on separation and literature on patterns in interpersonal relationships which lead to marital difficulties will be reviewed. The review does not include literature on individual personality disorders which may be thought to lead to marriage breakdown.

As mentioned above, studies which deal with the processes that lead to separation describe the processes as emanating from three different but inter-related sources: from changes in society, from interpersonal problems in relationships and from problems within individual personalities. These can be summarised as follows:

- Changing attitudes and opportunities in societies- individualisation, greater economic independence for women, less stigma, liberal divorce laws (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Dronkers *et al.*, 2006)
- Problems within the couple relationship- mismatch of expectations, poor communication skills and poor conflict resolution skills, drifting apart, loss of love, infidelity (Amato, 2000; O’Connor, 2001; McKeown *et al.*, 2003)
- Problems in individuals – Problems in families of origin, personality disorders, addictions (McDonnell, 1999; O’Connor, 2001).

### **Changes in Society- Individualisation**

Dronkers *et al.* (2006) published a special issue of the *European Sociological Review* in December 2006 devoted to the “Causes and Consequences of Divorce”. They include sociological and demographic analyses on the causes and

consequences of divorce in different European countries. One argument put forward in this issue is that divorce has increased as a result of increased individualisation and secularisation in society. It is argued, for instance, that “[t]hese two processes put pressure on the traditional values of marriage and raising children, leading to an increased divorce rate” (p.479) in countries where divorce is legally possible. Another argument is in the “economic tradition” (p. 479) which attributes high rates of divorce to changes in the balance of costs and benefits of marriage for both husbands and wives. As women become more economically independent, it is suggested that they have more options about whether or not to stay in unsatisfactory marriages. Another argument put forward, mainly by anti-divorce politicians, is that liberal divorce laws lead to higher rates of divorce (Dronkers *et al.*, 2006). However, Burley and Regan (2002) and Fahey and Field (2008) show clearly that the introduction of legalised divorce into Ireland in 1997 did not lead to the massive increase in marital breakdown that had been predicted. The absence of barriers to divorce in the form of social stigmatisation or restrictive legislation is also argued to lead to higher divorce rates, but Dronkers *et al.* (2006) contend that the reverse is more likely to be the case. In other words, that divorce laws tend to be liberalised after divorce rates have increased rather than as a result of more liberal laws. As already discussed, this would certainly seem to have been the case in Ireland.

Wolcott and Hughes (1999) also stressed the need to take societal changes into account when studying the reasons why people divorce in Australia. Their study was part of a series of studies carried out by The Australian Institute of Family Studies entitled “The Australian Divorce Transition Project” ([www.aifs.org.au](http://www.aifs.org.au)). As part of that study, Wolcott and Hughes (1999) conducted a telephone survey of 650 divorced Australians. The contextual aspects of society which Wolcott and Hughes (1999) suggested needed to be taken into account when trying to understand the processes leading to marriage breakdown in Australia included the following:

- Current environments afford greater choice to individuals as to how they live their lives

- Social stigma attached to divorce has been largely removed in Australia
- There is an emphasis on personal growth, fulfilment and happiness
- There are greater expectations of marriage relationships
- There has been a lowering of the threshold of unhappiness required to trigger a divorce

(Wolcott and Hughes, 1999)

The implication that can be drawn from these points is that marriages in Australia have not suddenly deteriorated in quality, but that individuals have higher expectations of what marriage should be like and no longer feel as bound by social conventions to stay with a marriage that is less than satisfactory. The authors' contention is that the level of unhappiness required to trigger a divorce is considerably less than it would have been in the past. People expect to be happy and fulfilled in their marriages and if they are not happy, they leave. The 'bar' appears to have been lowered. In the past only extreme violence or alcohol abuse might have been considered as acceptable reasons to end a marriage. More generally, it is argued that nowadays, because people have much higher expectations of finding personal fulfilment and happiness within marriage, they may consider ending their marriage if these expectations are not met (Giddens, 1992).

These themes are similar to those identified when describing the changes that have taken place in Irish women's lives in the past sixty years, many of which have contributed to changed attitudes to separation. Greater choice due to economic independence, a perception that there is less stigma attached to separation, now that it has been legalised and has become more common, as well as more emphasis on personal fulfilment and higher expectations of relationships, are common themes in Irish women's visions of how they expect to live their lives (O'Connor, 1998). The theme of increased individualisation in society is mentioned in several studies as a key point to be considered when attempting to understand people's reasons for separating. This theme will be discussed further in Chapter 4, which will deal with the theoretical concepts to be used to analyse the data in this study.

### **Relationship Difficulties- Pathways to Disconnection**

Up to this point, most of the discussion has been on marriage as an institution and on societal influences on marriage breakdown. The discussion now turns to more relationship-based aspects of marriage and of marriage breakdown (McKeown *et al.*, 2004). There are clear overlaps between societal and interpersonal factors, but for the purposes of this section of the literature review, they will be discussed separately.

Problems with emotional closeness, with sorting out role responsibility about childcare and division of household tasks, with communication, with resolving conflicts and with negotiating sexual difficulties overlap in the literature on the interpersonal processes that lead to separation (Mc Donnell, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Amato, 2000; Amato and Wang, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; Amato and Previti, 2003; McKeown *et al.*, 2004). There is seldom a single reason for the breakdown of a relationship (Kiely, 1989).

Not feeling emotionally close to their partners and not feeling that emotions were reciprocated emerged as common themes in several of the studies reviewed (Mc Donnell, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; O'Connor, 2001; Amato and Previti, 2003; McKeown *et al.*, 2004). Amato published a number of articles (Amato, 2000; Amato and Wang, 2000; Amato and Previti, 2003) based on a seventeen-year longitudinal study of marital stability over the life course in the U.S. Two hundred and eight individuals whose marriages had broken down during the study period (1980-1997) were interviewed and asked why they felt their marriages had ended in divorce. The most commonly reported reasons given by the participants in the study were infidelity, incompatibility, substance abuse and 'growing apart'. Women were more likely than men to refer to emotional or relational issues. Similarly, Wolcott and Hughes (1999) found that the majority of the six hundred and fifty people in their Australian study also mentioned affective dimensions as the main reason for divorcing. The emphasis is on the modern concept of love as being the basis of a companionate marriage relationship.

In McDonnell (1999) the results of an Irish survey of eighty couples who had applied for a Church annulment<sup>17</sup> in 1993 to the Galway Regional Marriage Tribunal are presented. The year 1993 was chosen because it was the most recent year for which there were records of completed case notes, prior to 1998 when McDonnell was doing a Masters, on which this book is based. It is significant that the first qualitative Irish study in this area focused on couples who were applying for a Church annulment of their marriages rather than for a civil dissolution. It draws our attention to the manner in which marriage and marital problems were clearly located within the realms of the Church authorities rather than the civil authorities in Ireland even as late as 1993. It highlights the notion that marriage as a sacrament was more important than marriage as a civil contract. McDonnell put forward a thesis that “marital breakdown and separation is in essence a failure on the part of the couple to negotiate mutually acceptable roles within the marriage” (p.118). He identified two broad categories of problem areas in marriage, “barometer issues” and “crisis issues” (p.127). “Barometer issues” referred to sexual, financial and accommodation issues. McDonnell referred to these as “barometer issues” because he felt they were a reflection of more significant difficulties, “such as a lack of affection between the couple and an inability to negotiate solutions to problems” (p.127). “Crisis issues” included violence, alcohol/drug abuse and infidelity and were referred to as crisis issues because they “strike directly at the essence of the marital relationship” (p. 128).

In 2001, Dr. Colm O’Connor, Clinical Psychologist, published three studies conducted at the Cork Marriage Counselling centre. The focus of the studies was on distressed relationships rather than specifically on marital breakdown, but many of the findings are of relevance for this study on the experience of separation. O’Connor described the level of stress experienced by distressed couples as “quite profound” (p.20). He stated that working in a marriage counselling centre was “like the emotional equivalent of a hospital emergency room because of the degree of trauma and wounding suffered by people in

---

<sup>17</sup> Annulment is a declaration of nullity of a marriage under the Catholic Church’s Canon Law. It is not a legal dissolution and is granted on the grounds that the marriage, for a number of reasons, was invalid from its beginning. The annulment is granted by a diocesan tribunal.

families” (p.20). The problems O’Connor identified as contributing to marital difficulties included domestic violence, alcohol abuse, psychiatric illness and infidelity. McKeown *et al.* carried out a similar study for ACCORD, the Irish Catholic marriage counselling service, in 2002 and for the Marriage Relationship and Counselling Service (MRCS) in 2004. Similar to many of the findings of the American, Australian and Irish studies cited above, the issues McKeown *et al.* (2004) identified that contributed to distress in relationships included;

- problems in resolving conflict - volatile or avoidant styles
- problems in communication - not listening, criticism, insults
- negative behaviours - domestic violence, excessive drinking, unfaithfulness
- not sharing housework and childcare

McKeown *et al.* (2004) suggest that many of the problems distressed couples presented with could be described as resulting from a pattern of demand-withdrawal, “whereby women’s demands for change in a relationship are met by their partner’s withdrawal in the face of those demands, possibly because her ‘demands’ are experienced as criticism rather than invitation and his ‘withdrawal’ is experienced as avoidance rather than difficulty” (p.19). A pattern of withdrawal and avoidance of conflict and communication over time led to a gradual disconnecting and fragmenting of a relationship (Mc Donnell, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; O’Connor, 2001; Amato and Previti, 2003; McKeown *et al.*, 2004).

To summarise, relationship problems do not happen in a vacuum. Societal changes such as increasing individualisation, secularisation and economic prosperity have been presented (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Dronkers *et al.*, 2006) as being likely to lead to fragmenting of relationships between couples and to a loosening of family and community ties. Negative behaviours and negative patterns of communication and conflict resolution have also been presented as likely causes of disconnection in relationships. These latter behaviours amount to deficits in relationships which may be linked to higher expectations of partners and to aspirations for greater individualisation.

## **Life after Separation – Processes and Consequences**

This section will review material aimed at considering what has been written in relation to the research question about the losses and gains and shifts in identity for women that take place as a result of separation. A transitions framework, (Ahrons, 2005) which views separation as an ‘unscheduled’ transition in a family life cycle, informs much of the discussion on the literature reviewed in this section. Viewing separation as a transition presumes that separation is a journey, that it marks a change from what went before, that losses and gains will occur as part of the experience and that people will emerge with different identities than they had before the transition. Literature which deals with the emotional stages in the process of separation and studies which track the shifts in identity and the sense of loss and failure engendered by separating, as well as studies that detail the need to make new beginnings following separation will be reviewed in this section.

### **Stages in the Process - Endings and Beginnings**

For her doctoral dissertation at the Institute for Clinical Social Work in Chicago, Doris Wineman (1999) held focus groups involving a total of eighteen women who had divorced in midlife. Wineman adopted a grounded theory approach to her study and constructed a model of the stages involved in the divorce process from the data gathered in the focus groups. She identified six stages that women tended to go through before, during and after divorce:

- “Early rumblings” refers to the stage before separation when women felt that their marriages were in serious trouble.
- “The horror of it all” is the phrase Wineman uses to describe the depression, fear, loss, shame and general upset that women felt immediately following separation.
- “Suddenly single” describes how confused women were about their identities as ‘newly single’ or ‘single again’ women.
- “Coming out of it” is the phrase used to describe the period where women felt they were adjusting to life following divorce and beginning to move on.

- “When you least expect it” refers to the on-going nature of the upset that divorce can cause, even years after the event. Her interviewees mentioned that they continued to find family gatherings, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, weddings, graduations and christenings difficult, even after years of being divorced. This last stage links with the discussion about the on-going importance for Irish women of family gatherings to celebrate, mainly Catholic, holidays (Inglis, 2008) and about how marital separation may make such family gatherings problematic as people struggle to define who is still in their family and who is now outside their family.

A number of themes are evident in the stages of the process of separating as described by Wineman (1999). Her main emphasis is on the emotional and social processes, as opposed to the more practical aspects involved in sorting out financial and housing arrangements. These include the need for women to construct new identities when they find themselves ‘suddenly single again’, the need to adapt, to cope with a range of stresses and challenges and to transition to a new phase in their lives.

Carter and McGoldrick (2005), in their book *The Expanded Family Life Cycle* suggest that the emotional work of divorce entails the retrieval of self from the marriage. Both partners must reconstruct their identities, hopes, dreams and plans for a different future than they had planned together as a couple.

Gertina van Schalkwyk published a study in 2005 based on an analysis of written accounts by four professional women, two black and two white, who got divorced in South Africa between 1990 and 1999. The study is concerned with exploring how the women reconstructed their identities in a society in which being a divorced woman is not the norm. The women wrote about how their previous construction of themselves as relational beings was largely lost following divorce and how they felt responsible for the failure of their relationships.

The women in the South African study used the language of loss to describe the period immediately following divorce. One woman described the process of disengaging from her relationship with her husband as being like “the live amputation of a limb” (p.94). As well as the loss of identity in no longer being part of a couple, there was also the sense of loss of not being part of what was considered to be an intact family anymore. It is argued that coming to terms with these losses requires a period of mourning which is, in some respects, similar to the mourning that takes place following a death (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). ‘Intact’ families are considered to be central to women’s identities in Ireland. It is argued that women lived in a private sphere in which a particular form of family, based on marriage and distinct roles for women and men, was everything (O’Connor, 1998).

Gregson and Ceyner (2009) completed a study in Tacoma, Washington, U.S.A., in which they interviewed thirty-one women from the Tacoma area in order “to explore women’s identity shifts as they navigate their post-divorce lives” (p.564). Similar to the women in the South African study, the women felt a sense of loss for their former lives but they also felt a sense of hope at the opportunity for a new beginning. Gregson and Ceyner (2009) found that the women actively worked at changing their identity by changing their physical appearance, by redecorating their houses and by removing articles that were associated with their married lives.

According to Smart (2007), feelings about ‘things’ can change following separation. Clearing out the clutter of previous relationships often comes to symbolise a way of moving on and constructing a new identity. Things can signify degrees of embeddedness and relatedness so women may choose which things from their married lives to keep and which things to discard. Bateson (2000) emphasises the importance of knowing how to ‘pack’ for a new situation, such as a separation, of knowing which things to bring and also knowing how to unpack and decide which things to leave behind.

Specifically in relation to women who separate in midlife, Teresa Sakraida from the School of Nursing at Pittsburgh University, U.S.A., interviewed a sample of

24 women aged between 34 and 53 about their experiences of divorce (Sakraida, 2005). The women were drawn from divorce support groups and court records in northeastern Indiana. Sakraida suggested that because women at midlife are likely to be leaving long-term relationships, divorce at this stage is likely to involve more significant changes in relationships, routines and roles than for younger women (Sakraida, 2005). By midlife, patterns established during marriage may have been in existence over decades.

Kusgen-McDaniel and Coleman (2003) from the University of Missouri, U.S.A., also studied recently divorced women in this midlife age group. They used a case study approach and interviewed five women, all of whom resided in a mid-western state, on three occasions about their experiences of divorce following long-term marriage. Similar to Sakraida's finding, they found that women struggled to develop an identity as a single person because they had been married and part of a couple for so long. The women said that initially they felt disoriented and confused about their identities when they separated. They feared for how they would cope on their own in the future (Kusgen-McDaniel and Coleman, 2003).

Like the women in the South African study, the women in Kusgen-McDaniel and Coleman's study (2003) also blamed themselves for the failure of their marriages and had very poor conceptions of their self-worth. The women felt they were expected to do all the emotion work in families, an essential part of which involved keeping their husbands happy and that somehow they had failed to do this. But like the women in the Gregson and Ceyner (2009) study, McDaniel and Coleman (2003) also describe how the women were making new friends, building new careers and making decisions to restructure their lives. A similar finding was noted in a study by Thomas and Ryan (2008) who interviewed ten women aged between 48 and 73, in the state of Indiana, U.S.A. The challenges these women identified included challenges associated with single parenthood and with physical, emotional and financial difficulties, but they also described growth opportunities in relation to their future career goals. Divorce was experienced as a series of social and psychological endings that women had to transition through in order to make new beginnings.

Ambiguity about who the women are, about finding or constructing a new identity were also stated to be significant contributors to stress at the time of separation. “There is a lack of adequate norms, knowledge and role models” (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005: 385) in the U.S. about how to be separated in midlife. Because divorce is new in Ireland, Irish people may not be sure how to react to it and this ambiguity, according to Carter and McGoldrick (2005), may add to the stress experienced. Irish women who currently separate in midlife are the first generation of women to have been in that situation. They have no role models to guide them in the reconstruction of their identities. In previous generations Irish women in midlife may have expected to live alone due to being widowed or because their husbands had gone abroad, for instance to England, to work but they would not have expected to live alone due to being separated. There is no script for how to ‘do’ separation in midlife in Ireland.

Gertina van Schalkwyk (2005) claims that the point at which the divorced women in her study began to reconstruct their identities was the point at which they could attribute some positive meaning to their past and present experiences and move on from using a ‘discourse of failure’ about themselves for being divorced.

### **Coping, Support and Adaption following Separation**

This section of the literature review deals with material aimed at beginning to answer the research question about the ways in which relationships and family practices are re-constructed following separation. Relationships and family practices are interpreted very broadly and include emotional as well as practical ways in which families change and are re-configured as a consequence of separation.

Amato (2000) reviewed literature published in the U.S.A. in the 1990s which dealt with the consequences of divorce. He began his review by stating that “the largest number of studies begins with the assumption that marital disruption is a stressful life transition to which adults and children must adjust” (p. 1270). Based

on the findings of the studies he reviewed, Amato constructed a model which he called a “divorce-stress-adjustment” perspective (Amato, 2000: 1269). The stressors he identified for adults included sole parenting responsibility or loss of custody of children, more in the case of men than of women, loss of emotional support, continuing conflict with an ex-spouse, economic decline and other stressful divorce-related events. The protective factors Amato identified were individual resources, such as education, employment, income, friends, family, remarriage, having a positive definition and meaning of divorce and demographic factors such as gender, age, race and children. Amato suggested that these protective factors may help to moderate how divorce is experienced and may affect the level of adjustment that results.

Amato concluded his review of literature (2000) by stating that “the accumulated research suggests that marital dissolution has the potential to create considerable turmoil in people’s lives. But people vary greatly in their reactions. Divorce benefits some individuals, leads others to experience temporary decrements in well-being, and forces others on a downward trajectory from which they may never recover” (p. 1269). He argues that there is no easy way to predict which category a separating individual will fall into, recognising that the process of divorce adjustment is very individual and very complex (Amato and Wang, 2000). It involves individual adjustment but is also influenced by societal and cultural factors.

Studies on the support women find beneficial following separation expand on some of the ‘protective factors’ to which Amato refers. Henderson and Argyle (1985), from Oxford University, in the U.K., found that friends, specifically those who were not joint friends of a couple were the most important source of support. They were followed by the women’s children and close family members. Steward and Clarke (1995), in a study of 116 separated women in Australia, found that esteem support, support that built a sense of self-worth, confidence and personal control was of most assistance. The importance of having a support network following divorce was emphasised. Smerglia *et al.* (1999), from the University of Akron in Ohio, U.S.A., did a literature review and analysis of fifteen articles which were published between 1986 and 1998 on

support following divorce. They also found that feeling understood, having someone to listen, someone to socialise with and someone who was emotionally supportive were the most beneficial types of support identified by women who were separated. These findings emphasise, again, the emotional and social nature of the experience of separation for women and that it is in emotional and social areas that they appreciate help.

Having socio-emotional support and continuing to belong to a social network would seem to be particularly important in an Irish context. Inglis (2008) argues that what made Ireland different from other countries in the past was the very strong sense of sameness people felt within families and communities. The danger is that Irish women who are separated may be made to feel that they are different, they become 'other' and not the 'same as us' in negative ways. Inglis says that a particular type of social bond and sense of belonging developed in families and in communities in Ireland in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (p.37). To lose being part of an extended family and social network as a result of separation could be a significant loss in situations where social networks are built around family affiliations (O'Connor, 1998) and where alternative networks may not be readily available. The extent to which Irish women who separate feel isolated or disconnected from former extended family members, from joint friends and from social situations previously attended as part of a couple will form part of the discussion in the later Chapters of this dissertation.

### **Housing and Financial Arrangements following Separation**

According to Smart (2007), the sorting out of things becomes a metaphor for the sorting out of relationships and memories and the construction of new definitions of family and family practices. Following divorce, the sorting out can be forced rather than undertaken voluntarily. Feelings of hurt, pain and regret are revived. "This forced sharing out of possessions is in effect a dismantling of what was planned to be a joint future" (Smart, 2007: 169). Studies in Ireland (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011) show that, in the vast majority of cases, mothers remain in the family home with their children following separation. Smart (2007) talks about a home being far more than a house; it contains family history but its meaning may change following an event like a

separation. It remains to be explored in this study as to what meaning women in midlife ascribe to staying in their family homes following separation and what the practical and financial implications are of staying in the same house.

The meaning and value given to money can also change overtime and depend on relationships (Smart, 2007). Money may be unimportant when people are young and in love, but become very important when they are in midlife, discover that their partner is having an affair and become separated. A consistent finding that emerges from the literature is that women are less well off financially following separation. The *One Plus One Report* (Coleman and Glenn, 2009) states that women in the U.K. are forty per cent more likely to enter poverty if they divorce than if they stay married. The report summarises the costs incurred in divorcing as including legal fees, running two houses instead of one, moving, additional childcare costs, less availability for work, cost of counselling and other medical services. The overriding conclusion drawn in the report is that, even though divorce has become more common in the U.K., there is still a clear association between relationship breakdown and adult and child disadvantage. This was also the fear expressed in Ireland during the two divorce referenda, as discussed earlier.

Wilfred Uunk (2004) used official government statistics from 1994-2000 to compare the economic consequences of divorce for women across fourteen E.U. countries. The median income drop after one year of separation was calculated at twenty-four per cent across the fourteen countries, but the figure in Ireland was thirty-four per cent, considerably above this average. In Denmark, Finland and Portugal, two thirds of the women worked in paid employment prior to divorce. In Ireland, half of the women worked before separation. According to Uunk (2004), employment participation was directly related to the availability of child care places. His overall conclusion was that “most women suffer economically from divorce, yet the income decline is larger in some countries than in others” (p.278). He suggests that the reason the income decline is larger in some countries than in others is because welfare payments, childcare facilities and employment policies are more generous in some countries than in others.

Andreb *et al.* (2006) studied the economic consequences of partnership dissolution in Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Sweden and largely confirmed Uunk's findings. They found that the income decline for women following divorce was highest in Italy and lowest in Sweden, with the other countries ranging in between. They concluded that women's economic situations following divorce were related to the general level of economic autonomy women had in different countries. This raises the question as to why women who are graduates in Ireland have a higher rate of separation than other women. Do they separate because they can afford to? Does this mean that other women who are in midlife and who are unhappy in their marriages stay married because they cannot afford to leave? Analysis of the data collected for this study may begin to throw some light on the first question. The second question raises a much bigger issue which concerns the overall quality of marriage of couples at midlife in Ireland but is beyond the scope of this study.

Weston and Smyth (2000), who were writing about the findings of the Australian Divorce Transition project ([www.aifs.org.au](http://www.aifs.org.au)), state that "besides parental conflict, it is the economic fallout from divorce that drives many of the negative consequences of divorce" (Weston and Smyth, 2000: 10). They state that "[o]n separation, children usually live with their mothers. Yet mothers typically have a lower earning capacity than fathers, whose careers are generally not adversely affected by the demands associated with child rearing or home making" (p.10). They argued that in this study the women who separated after the age of forty-five were said to be the most disadvantaged, because most of them were found to be either living alone or as single parents.

Sheehan and Fehlberg (2000), also writing about this Australian study, drew attention to problems with the "equal treatment" approach taken in family law cases to providing for men's and women's needs following separation. They illustrate how the two usual pathways out of poverty, working and re-partnering, may not be options for women, due to caring responsibilities for family members. They question the assumption that the Courts make about 'gender neutrality' and argue that 'equal treatment' may result in an inequitable outcome for women whose caring role during the marriage and into the future is not given

sufficient recognition. In this they draw attention to the importance of recognising and dealing with difference in aiming for equal treatment.

A similar concern about the outcomes for women of an equal treatment approach was raised by Coulter (2008) and by Mahon and Moore (2011). They found that in Irish court proceedings maintenance payments to wives are rarely made. “In summary, maintenance payments to wives are very rare and a degree of self-sufficiency, later if not sooner, is expected of them, even if they have been full-time carers of their children” (Mahon and Moore, 2011: 54). Such evidence contradicts popular opinion to the contrary. There is an assumption that maintenance payments for wives are common when, in fact, they are very rare. For instance, Martin (2002) in his article on the need for ‘clean break’ provisions in Irish divorce law, talks about how unfair it is under Irish divorce legislation that women can have ‘a meal ticket for life’. Smart (1999) referred to a similar attitude to women in the U.K. where initially there had been sympathy for older women who were divorced, but that this sympathy had evaporated and older women were, as quoted in the first chapter, “redefined as alimony drones and as women who were too idle to work” (p.8).

The difficulty with arguments favouring an equal treatment approach is that women with children have not had equal access to employment because of the lack of childcare in Ireland and because of the traditional construction of gender roles which dictated that the mother was the parent who would stay at home in order to care for the children. Women who are in midlife may struggle to become self-sufficient in the current economic climate and the expectation that they would do so may be founded on unfair assumptions about gender equality, which fails to recognise the full context of their lives up to that point in time.

Hilton and Anderson, from the School of Social Work at the University of Nevada, U.S.A, (2009) raised many of the same issues as Sheehan and Fehlberg (2000). Hilton and Anderson surveyed 459 married women and 180 divorced women who had participated in the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) over a fifteen year period. They found that midlife divorced women had fewer pension entitlements due to interrupted or part-time work histories, less

time to save for retirement and were “more likely to have difficulty finding new mates to share their economic burdens with” than younger women (p. 312). In divorce settlements, women were more likely to get the family home and furnishings, rather than access to their partner’s pension or investments. Their major finding was that “midlife divorce had long-term negative financial consequences for women, especially in regard to wealth accumulation” (p.309). They concluded that women who divorced in midlife were less well off financially than women who remained married.

As discussed above, these findings may have particular relevance for Irish women in midlife, given that many of them may have given up work to care for their children and locate their lives closely within their families. They may struggle to get back into the workforce and may have inadequate pension contributions. Skills that they may have acquired may be out of date. Being left in the house may be a ‘mixed blessing’ if they do not have the means to maintain it. The possibility of finding a new partner with whom to share expenses may not be feasible for many women in this age group. As already mentioned, census findings for 2006 and 2011 show that Irish women who separate are unlikely to re-partner especially if they are over forty-five years of age. This all adds up to potentially serious financial consequences into old age for those who separate in midlife.

### **Post Separation Parenting**

How children are affected by separation is a central aspect of the experience of separation for mothers. Until relatively recently, children’s voices were not heard when arrangements were being made following separation (Smart, 1999). More recently post-separation parenting has attracted a significant amount of research interest in Ireland (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Timonen *et al.*, 2009; Mahon and Moore, 2011). The Hogan *et al.* (2002) study surveyed sixty children aged between 8-17 whose parents had separated or divorced. The overall finding of the study was that experiences differed considerably, to the extent that it was not possible to conclude definitively whether separation was positive or negative for the children. *The One Plus One report* (2009) completed by Colemann and Glenn in the U.K. came to a similar conclusion stating that “the majority of children are

able to adjust to a changing situation after a period of instability whilst others are less fortunate with negative impacts extending into adulthood” (p.05). The research evidence suggested that, by and large, children are resilient and given the appropriate support, can overcome adversity.

Hogan *et al.* (2002) found that the presence or absence of conflict and the extent to which children’s lives changed on a daily basis were key factors in how children adapted to their parents’ separating. In the foreword to the *One Plus One report* (2009), Michael Rutter makes a similar point. He questions whether the risks associated with divorce for children are as a result of the stresses associated with the divorce or whether they result from an accumulation of changes that occur in children’s lives.

The vast majority of the children in the Hogan *et al.* (2002) study continued to live with their mothers following separation, but had regular access to their fathers. These findings are similar to those described earlier (Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011). The tendency is that women effectively become sole home owners and single parents on a daily basis. The study by Mahon and Moore (2011) discussed the financial and emotional consequences for mothers of becoming single parents, but also drew attention to the practice whereby the women must continue to have some level of contact with their ex-husbands in situations where children have regular access to their fathers.

The role of women as ‘gate closers and gate openers’ in terms of whether they facilitate or hinder contact between children and their fathers has been attracting research interest since legislation in the U.K. and in Australia changed to ensure greater contact for fathers (Rhoades, 2002; Smart and May, 2004; Trinder, 2008). This may or may not be an issue in the current study, given that most of the children will be either teenagers or young adults at the time of their parents’ separations. The aspect which may be relevant is the discourse and expectation that separations should be ‘harmonious’ and that ex-spouses should continue to have contact and to co-operate on family and parenting matters (Mahon and Moore, 2011). This topic will be taken up later when discussing the type of

contact that the women in this study have with their husbands following separation.

The Timonen *et al.* (2009) study set out to understand the nature of contact and support between grandparents, grandchildren and their parents following separation. Interviews were carried out with 31 grandparents between August and October 2008. The key findings of the study were that grandparents had a significant role to play in supporting their children and their grandchildren, especially in the early stages of separation. They were described as “arguably the lynchpin” (p. xiv) in helping parents and grandchildren to cope by providing financial assistance, housing, child care, legal advice and emotional support. Smart (2005a) came to a similar conclusion about grandparents in her studies in the U.K. She noted that “at times of divorce, the grandparent generation becomes incredibly important as a source of support and comfort” (p.144). Regardless of whether or not the grandparents approved of divorce, they stepped in to help their child and grandchildren when they needed help at the time of the separation (Smart, 2005a). Given the age of the women in this study, it is likely that many of their parents will be deceased.

Women who separate in midlife are likely to be raising teenagers or young adults or they may have what is commonly referred to as an ‘empty nest’, where their children are largely living elsewhere. Research shows (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005) that separation is more common at this stage of a family life cycle. Whether children are still at home, whether they are at college and how they react to the separation of their parents are all crucial aspects of the experience of separating for mothers and will form part of the analysis in this study. However, the primary focus will be on women as women, rather than as mothers. Being mothers is only a part of their lives, even though it is a vital part.

### **Experience of Initiators and Non-Initiators**

A question which appears in the literature on adjustment following divorce is the question as to whether the experience of divorce is influenced by whether the woman is the initiator or the non-initiator of the divorce. A deliberate decision was made at the start of this study to include women who were initiators of

separation as well as women who were non-initiators. The intention was to try to capture the experience of separation from a woman's perspective, as a gendered experience, regardless of the specific circumstances that led to the separation. As part of the study described already (pp.61, 62), Sakranda (2005) conducted interviews with twenty-four women who classified themselves as initiators and non-initiators of divorce. She found that differences did exist in the divorce transition experience depending on whether women initiated the divorce or not. She found that initiators spoke more often about self worth and optimism. They identified that they had lost friends and in-law family relationships due to the separation, but that they had made new friends and had availed of more opportunities in their workplaces. She found that non-initiators spoke more often about being left, abandoned and rejected. They engaged in 'obsessive rumination' and felt vulnerable. Many of the non-initiators in the sample that Sakranda interviewed found support from their spiritual beliefs. Spiritual beliefs and the role of the Catholic Church may be particularly relevant for this study, given the history of strong religious observance and the dominant role of the Catholic Church in the provision of social services in Ireland.

This study is not setting out to establish any distinctions between the experiences of women who identify themselves as initiators of separation and those who identify themselves as non-initiators but it may be an important factor to consider in light of how particularly difficult it might be, in an Irish context, for the woman to be the one to end the marriage.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter was structured around reviewing literature which would help to guide exploration of the research questions with which this study is concerned. The material reviewed in each section informed the questions that were subsequently asked during the fieldwork stage of the study. The material relating to first question, which looks at the specific Irish influences on how separation is understood, detailed the debates that took place in Ireland in 1986 and 1995 during the two divorce referenda campaigns. On these two occasions opposing views on marriage breakdown and how it should be handled in Ireland were

expressed. The importance attached to marriage and family and fears that divorce might threaten family stability were to the fore in many of the debates. The tiny margin by which the amendment was passed, at the second attempt, reveals the deep unease that many people felt about divorce in Ireland. While the vote in favour of divorce in 1995 reveals that attitudes had changed somewhat, residues of more traditional beliefs clearly still remained. This material raised questions about how women who separated in midlife were impacted by the deep divisions in Irish society in relation to marital breakdown. It raised questions about whether the women encountered negative reactions, particularly from people of their parents' generation, as a result of separating. It raised questions about whether the women felt their children might be subject to stigma as a result of coming from a separated family.

The second research question attempts to identify the key contributory processes that lead to separation. Societal influences such as greater individualisation and higher expectations of marriage within modern society are identified as contributory factors to separation, but the focus of this section is more on the interpersonal difficulties which lead to decisions to separate. Findings from the studies reviewed mention common reasons for separating which include a lack of emotional closeness, an inability to communicate and an inability to resolve conflicts and disagreements over sharing childcare and housework. These difficulties seem to be underpinned by basic differences in expectations between men and women about what marriage and love entail. Women's roles in society have changed in some respects, through for instance greater access to and participation in employment. However, in other respects, such as that of housework and childcare, their roles have largely retained traditional patterns. It is argued that they are trying to play older more traditional roles by new rules (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). The issues identified above as contributing to marriage breakdown, namely, interpersonal difficulties, differences between men and women about gender roles and women's economic autonomy informed the questions that were asked of the research participants about the events and processes that they felt had contributed to the ending of their marriages.

The next section reviewed literature aimed at exploring the third research question which focussed on the transitions and shifts in identity that take place as women transition through separation. Discussion centred on arguments that women need to adjust their identities from thinking of themselves as part of a long-term married couple to thinking of themselves as individuals again. An overview was offered of the processes involved for individuals who are going through a series of losses on their way to making a series of new beginnings (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). The sense of failure and loss were mentioned (van Schalkwyk, 2005) as well as ambiguity about new roles. Feelings of loss and failure are particularly pertinent issues in an Irish context given the history of negative attitudes towards marital breakdown and the fact that the women in this study have few role models to inform them about how to 'do' separation and how to construct positive identities in the aftermath of separation.

The next section dealt with literature which related to the research question on the ways in which relationships and practical aspects of family living are re-structured as a result of separation. As a general rule, children tend to stay with their mothers and, if finances allow, the mothers and children tend to stay in the family homes (Mahon and Moore, 2011). Increased risks of poverty for women and children were mentioned in several studies (Sheehan and Fehlberg, 2000; Weston and Smyth, 2000; Hilton and Anderson, 2009) although the level of risk tends to depend on the level of economic autonomy of the women in different countries. The findings on each of the relationship and practical outcomes of divorce described above informed the questions asked of the women about their relationships following separation and about their financial and housing circumstances.

Lastly, it was identified that much of the literature about women separating focuses on whether the women were initiators or non-initiators of their separation. Separation was found to be difficult for both initiators and non-initiators but initiators seemed to adjust to their new situations in a more positive manner than non-initiators (Sakraida, 2005). While this study did not set out to compare the adjustment patterns of initiators and non-initiators, it was helpful to

be aware of the research findings on the different patterns of adjustment by each group.

Part of the objective of the study was to see if international findings about women's experiences of separation in midlife would be replicated in an Irish context. Part of the objective was to see if previously held public condemnation of separation would impact on how this age cohort of women adapted to separation. The literature reviewed on separation and divorce in both an Irish and an international context influenced the design of the demographic questionnaire (Appendix 1) that was sent to the women in advance of the interviews and also informed the questions that were asked of the women during the fieldwork stage of this study.

## CHAPTER 4:

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING THE PROCESS AND EXPERIENCE OF SEPARATION

### **Introduction**

As mentioned in the introductory chapter, this study is located within the sociology of family and personal relationships. It is positioned in the middle ground between macro theories, such as functionalism, feminism and individualisation, and micro theories, such as symbolic interactionism and exchange theory (Hilliard, 1995; Bernardes, 1997; Morgan, 2002). The objective is to explore women's experience of separation from the 'inside', from the women's perspective. The position taken is that individual perspectives are influenced by social contexts and by ideologies (functionalist, feminist or individualist) which surround family, marriage and gender. These ideologies are acted out in daily interactions which lead to patterns of behaviour in the manner in which relationships are performed (symbolic interactionism and exchange theory). Meanings and emotions, often involving love or the absence of love, are attached to the interaction patterns that develop. These meanings can change over the life course of individuals (developmental approach) and in response to societal change (link back to macro theories).

Theories structure how family is thought about; what is observed and how observations are interpreted (Bernardes, 1997). Family ideology ensures that some aspects of social reality are seen and other aspects are not seen or become invisible.

What ideology does is to select from the range of possible ways in which a society might handle the relationships between the biological and the cultural, ...and to proclaim the method so selected as **the** method, as natural and inevitable (Morgan, 1985)

Functionalism and feminism are two such approaches and will be discussed in greater detail here because these approaches, in particular, have been so influential on theorising about families. Individualisation will be discussed later in this chapter.

Functionalism starts from the position of what is good for society. It identifies the functions or activities that families need to perform in order to facilitate social order in society. Parsons (1955) was one of the main exponents of functionalism. He identified childhood socialisation and the maintenance of adult personalities as being the two key functions that families needed to perform. He drew upon popular stereotypes of the family to create an ideal model; the nuclear family of a married couple plus children. According to Bernardes (1997), Parsons' version of functionalism became the central means of discussing family life in human society. Notions about 'normative' family practices, 'normative' gender role activities and the importance of retaining 'intact' families are largely drawn from functionalism. These notions were particularly prevalent in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s and fitted with the dominant Catholic ideology on family at that time.

Feminists question many of the assertions that functionalists make about the family and, in particular, about women's roles within families. They begin, not with a particular conception of the family, but with gender as a basic category of analysis. They set out not to study the family *per se* but the structures which composed it. Feminists have identified and made visible central areas of family living; men's authority, women's economic dependence, inequality in the division of household tasks, women's exclusive responsibility for caring, domestic violence, child sex abuse and a range of previously unseen aspects of family life (Delphy and Leonard, 1992; Hilliard, 1995; Bernardes, 1997). According to Hilliard (1995), "[feminism] established the need to 'deconstruct' the concept of family itself.....and to facilitate a more empirically grounded understanding of the phenomenon" (p.65). This is the location of many of the theorists (Morgan, 1996; Smart, 2007) whose approaches to the study of families and to women's experiences, in particular, have been so influential on how this study is theorised and on how it was carried out. This study set out to provide an empirically grounded understanding of women's experiences of separation. The study is located primarily but not exclusively within feminism.

## **Influences on Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework used for this study is derived, in part, from that used by Smart (2007) in her publication *Personal Life*. In opposition to the dominance of the individualisation thesis (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 2006), meaning the pursuit of individual rather than family goals, as an explanation for change in families, Smart (2007) focussed on emphasising aspects of continued connectedness in personal lives and in families. She claims that the individualisation thesis directs our search towards fragmentation, separation and autonomy and contends that while families may be changing in structure, as in the case of marital separation, that the relationships between individuals in families are still about connectedness.

Smart's (2007) approach to theorising is that it is not an end in itself but that it is a 'tool box' full of insights that can be put together to form a flexible analysis of data. Following Smart's lead, a number of concepts were selected which best captured the issues with which this study was concerned. Some of the concepts chosen explore connectedness, in particular, the concepts of embeddedness and love labour. Other concepts explore fragmentation, for example, the concepts of loss and individualisation. Other concepts capture elements of both connectedness and fragmentation, for example, the concepts of transition and identity formation and change. Rather than just focussing on connectedness as Smart (2007) suggests or on fragmentation as individualisation theorists (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 2006) suggest, an attempt is made to include both concepts in the same framework in this study.

Smart (2007) identified the range of writers whose work she built on in her approach to studying personal lives. These writers have also influenced the approach taken in this dissertation. Smart (2007) drew on David Morgan's (1996) work on family practices in which he suggested that families are, what families do. He claims that families are much more fluid than structural functionalists, for example Parsons and Bales (1955), contend and, that rather than having an ideology on how families ought to behave and judging families according to how well they carry out pre-determined functions, that it makes

more sense to study what families actually do and to accept that those practices constitute what family is. This is the approach taken in this study whereby the practices that families develop following separation are considered to be how they are 'doing family' in their new situation rather than being considered to be in some way dysfunctional or problematic.

Smart also identified the work of Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (1993) on how negotiations are conducted in families as influencing her conceptual framework. Finch and Mason talk about 'kin', which is a broader concept, rather than family. The concept of kin, in the sense of including extended family relationships and the impact of separation on these relationships is drawn upon in this dissertation. Finch and Mason study how families negotiate relationships, by researching how people make wills (Finch and Mason, 2000). They argue that the manner in which people make wills provides insight into what people feel they 'ought' to do for family members. Making a will involves identifying people whom the person feels connected to and whom they trust to respect their legacy. It involves attaching meaning to objects and the objects becoming part of family history. These are matters which are of concern to people when homes and possessions are being divided as a result of separation so the notion of ascribing meaning to family possessions will also be of use when analysing data for this study.

Smart also drew on the writing of John Gillis (1996; 2004) in which he deals with the importance of memory, ritual and imagining for how family values are constructed and maintained. Participants in this study were asked about their memories of their childhoods and the values about marriage and family that were passed on to them by deceased parents. The women were asked whether they continued former family rituals following separation and how they imagined their families into the future.

Using Gillis' concepts (1996, 2004) as well as Morgan's concepts (1996), Smart (2007) set out to emphasise not only the doing of family practices but also the thinking, memories and imagining that are part of family relationships. She talks about trying to capture personal life sociologically in a manner in which "feelings, emotions, memories, biographies and connections" (p.4) are central

rather than peripheral. As will be explained in the methodology chapter which follows, this was the approach taken to conducting the interviews in which the primary data for this study were gathered. Participants were asked about their feelings, memories and biographies, as well as being asked about the events at the time of their separations and the practical ways in which their lives had changed as a result of separating.

### **Embeddedness**

Embeddedness is a concept which is linked with being influenced by ideologies on family, on marriage, on gender and on separation. It is being used in two senses in this study. It relates to the ways in which women are connected to their families of origin and are influenced by the values and attitudes of family members. It relates to the extent to which women are influenced by and embedded in Irish values, beliefs and attitudes towards, for example, marriage and separation. As discussed in Chapter 2 on *Understanding Irish Women*, the notion of embeddedness in Catholicism, prevalent during their childhoods and as part of their socialisation, is key to understanding the experience of Irish women who are now in midlife and who are separated. Contemplating separation or divorce was not seen as an option for a woman who considered herself to be a good Catholic and, by extension, a good Irish woman when the women in this study were growing up. The family in this context was considered a key institution of continuity and women were held responsible for its continuance.

As well as being embedded in a Catholic belief system, many Irish women would also have grown up in very closely-knit families and communities. (As it transpired, all of the women who were interviewed for the study were brought up as Catholics.) Smart (2007) talks about how family embeddedness can be experienced, on the one hand, as providing ontological security or, on other hand, as being suffocating. She outlines “the importance of always putting the individual in the context of their past, their web of relationships, their possessions and their sense of location” (Smart, 2007: 45). In rural Ireland, embeddedness in family revolved around issues of status and respect which often came primarily from the family name (Inglis, 2003). Individuals were identified

by the families they belonged to, the amount of property their family owned and the reputations of those that came before them. To be separated in the past might well be conceived of as bringing shame on a family name.

As mentioned in Chapter 3 on *Understanding Separation and Divorce*, Inglis (2008) argues that there was a very strong sense of sameness and a lack of diversity amongst people in Ireland, prior to the 1980s. Belonging to close-knit families and communities engendered a sense of security and common identity. The reverse side of this coin is that bonds that were too strong inhibited the development of individual difference. The sameness and lack of diversity was evident in attitudes to, for example, marital separation. To be separated was to be 'different', to be 'other' and 'not like us' and possibly 'no longer one of us'. Being separated was seen as posing a threat to the continuity of a family. Paradoxically, as mentioned on page 43, there were some high profile people in politics in Ireland whose separated status did not stop them from being elected or from being appointed to senior government ministerial posts.

Another part of the task of this study is to find out to what extent people are still embedded in traditional ideals about marriage and whether stigma still attaches to being separated. The concepts of sameness and 'othering', which are part of embeddedness, will be useful when considering whether the women feel a sense of shame or a diminution of status as a result of living in a separated rather than an intact family.

### **Love Labour**

Smart (2007) bases much of her discussion about family relationships on the sociology of emotions and cites Lupton (1998) as a key source on this topic. Rather than seeing emotions as constructed and imposed by society, Lupton (1998) sees them as constructed through a shifting two-way process between individuals and society. Emotions are argued to be central to social and personal life. People communicate because of emotions. The communication and interaction, in turn, effect how people feel (their emotions). From this perspective, love is something one does and feels with others, rather than

something one has or falls into or out of, in the case of separation. Love turns everyday acts into activities laden with meaning (Smart, 2007). It is an important concept to include when trying to understand women's expectations of marriage and the processes that may lead to separation if these expectations are not fulfilled.

The concept of love labour is being used in a slightly different way in this dissertation than it is commonly used by writers on the ethic of care (Kittay, 2002; Lynch, 2007; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). Generally the term is used when discussing relationships that involve meeting high care dependency needs. While this is not the case between husbands and wives, the concept helps to explain many aspects of marital relationships which have been found to be important in this study. It has been chosen because the two words 'love' (or the absence of love) and 'labour' (or the absence of the labour needed to sustain a relationship) are such key concepts in understanding marriage and marriage difficulties.

Love labour does not just involve emotion work. It also involves physical, mental and cognitive work (Lynch, 2007). At a physical level, it involves, for example, doing household tasks, taking care of children, cooking favourite meals, shopping with the other's preferences in mind, keeping house with an eye to the other's comfort. At a mental level, it involves keeping the other in mind, prioritising their needs and interests, planning around the other. At a cognitive level, it involves understanding the other and using knowledge and cognitive skills to do the work of caring for others as well as possible. At an emotional level, love labour's principal goal is the well-being of the other (Lynch, 2007: 557). It involves engaging in very real activities which are aimed at 'looking out for' and 'looking after' the other. It is about 'having somebody's back'. According to Lynch, love labour also involves management of the tensions and conflict which are an integral part of all relationships (Lynch, 2007: 559). It may not be perceived as being motivated by love at the time, but attempting to deal with conflict is a key aspect of sustaining relationships (McKeown *et al.*, 2003).

Love labour involves a high level of time and commitment. It entails some level of commitment to continuing to do the work into the future, 'til death do us part'.

The tasks involved in doing love labour can be experienced as both pleasurable and burdensome at the same time (Lynch, 2007). Just because activities are experienced as burdensome does not mean they are not motivated by love. As mentioned above, love changes the meaning of everyday activities (Smart, 2007). Activities are interpreted as signs of love or as signs of the absence of love. Patterns emerge in how marital and parental relationships are conducted. These patterns can lead to greater connectedness and greater intimacy or they can lead to increasing disconnectedness and fragmentation.

The concept of love labour as involving the provision of care to dependants is also relevant to an understanding of how women experience marriage and separation. The work of caring for those who are dependent in families, for instance, children, people who are sick, older people, generally falls largely to women (Kittay, 2002; Lynch, 2007). Care giving responsibilities have a huge impact on the decisions women make and on the choices open to them (Lynch, 2007). Care giving can take up a significant portion of women's lives. It is generally unseen and under-valued and those who engage in it full time are, according to Lynch, largely invisible and under-valued (Lynch, 2007). As discussed in Chapter 2 on *Understanding Irish Women*, until relatively recently, it was not the norm for Irish women to work outside the home. Women who are currently in midlife are likely to have been full time housewives for at least part, if not all, of their married lives. This will effect how they fare following separation.

The concept of love labour will be used to analyse data on such aspects of married life as the transition to parenthood, the division of household tasks, emotional reciprocity between spouses, communication, conflict resolution and other affective dimensions of relationships. The extent to which love labour permeates women's lives and the decisions they make about work and home both before and following separation will form one of the lens through which the data for this study will be viewed.

## **Transitions Framework – Endings and Beginnings**

Carter and McGoldrick (2005) conceptualise divorce as an “unscheduled” transition in a traditional family life cycle. They divide their family life cycle model into stages which they suggest many families go through in a developmental manner. By utilising the concept of transition, divorce is normalised and placed in the same context as other family transitions, all of which involve a measure of disequilibrium and a need for re-organisation. Ahrons, writing in Carter and McGoldrick (2005) describes transitions as “turning points, uncomfortable periods that mark the beginning of something new while signifying the ending of something familiar” (Ahrons, 2005:384). But because the transition caused by divorce is ‘unscheduled’ it has greater potential than other transitions in families to result in difficulties for family members (Ahrons, 2005).

Bateson (2000) talks about the need for new understandings of marriage. Her argument is that marriage as an institution was designed to last ten or twenty years, in an era when average life expectancy was forty years or less. However, now that marriages are lasting up to fifty years because people are living longer, she suggests that new arrangements are needed. This, she argues, is because people need to have scope to make changes which reflect how they have changed and what they have learned along the way. She claims that models are needed for understanding marriages that end, that do not see them as failures. What Bateson (2000) is proposing is similar to what Ahrons (2005) is saying, which is that marital separation needs to be seen as a ‘normal’ transition, rather than being surrounded by a ‘discourse of failure’.

### **Endings and Loss**

Transitions, by definition, involve loss of much that was familiar. Separation and divorce involve several losses (Ahrons, 2005). There is the loss of a life style, the loss of identity as part of a couple, the loss of a partner, the loss of what is considered to be an intact family, the loss of friendships associated with being married and the loss of a future together. These losses are similar to those experienced by a bereaved spouse and much of the clinical and self-help

literature (Fisher and Alberti, 2006; O'Hara, 2011) talks about the need to mourn and to grieve for the losses experienced.

Much of the literature on loss is based on Bowlby's attachment theory (1983) whereby, when a person separates from an attachment figure, they go through a process of mourning and grief due to the loss of a relationship that was important to them. Fisher and Alberti (2006) apply Kubler-Ross' (1997) stages of grief to the process that people go through when their marriage ends. They identify stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance as 'normal' stages that people may go through in the weeks, months and years following separation. Worden's dual process model of grief (1991) is also used by practitioners working with separated people (O'Hara, 2011). Worden holds that there are four tasks involved in grieving, namely; to accept the reality of the loss, to work through the pain of grief, to adjust to a new environment without the person and to emotionally relocate the person and move on with their lives (Worden, 1991).

There are similarities in the emotional experience of grief and loss whether it is grief and loss caused by bereavement or by separation. However, the difference between bereavement and separation is that separation often also involves feelings of rejection and betrayal and results from "a deliberate dissolution" of the couple relationship (Ahrons, 2005: 385). There are no communal rituals to support the people who are separating. There are few adequate role models to show the way. There is a void and an ambiguity about how to behave and how to successfully make this transition (p.385). It can be expected that this ambiguity is felt not only by the people who separate but also by the people around them who are not sure what to say, how to react or how to be supportive (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005).

### **New Beginnings**

Transitions, by definition, also involve the beginning of something new, of transitioning to a new place or a new status. "Survival requires adaption....but the very concept implies some sameness that continues through change; the difficulty lies in defining and affirming that which survives" (Bateson, 2000: 134). In order to survive separation, women have to adapt to being separated.

They have to decide which pieces of their married lives to keep and which pieces to lose. Bateson (2000) suggests that people need to be like explorers in how they go about constructing their lives, checking out new options and turning problems into opportunities. She optimistically states that people need to see themselves as being like cats with nine lives and as having the ability to land on their feet each time they fall. She talks about marriage being about 'adaption ever after' rather than 'happily ever after'.

Bateson states further that "every shift in the shape of lives proposes new understandings of freedom and shifts in the intersecting geometries of obligation and dependency" (Bateson, 2000:53-54). Seen from this perspective, separation can be construed as potentially providing an opportunity for greater individual freedom for family members and for freedom from a range of obligations that may have been part of being a married couple.

Rather than focusing on finding evidence of fragmentation and disconnection in families in the aftermath of separation, the transitions framework and Bateson's (1989) perspective, which view problems in terms of the creative opportunities they present, (p.4) focus on the restructuring and reorganising of family relationships (Ahrons, 2005). The emphasis is on adaption and transitioning to a new beginning, rather than on the 'death of the family' or the 'demise of family values'.

### **Identity**

Identity is an important concept through which to view women's experience of separation. Change in a marital relationship can lead to confusion about identity and the need to construct new identities. The perspective taken on identity in this study is that it is socially constructed (Burr, 2003). Burr states that "[w]e are born into a world where the conceptual frameworks and categories used by the people in our culture already exist" (Burr, 2003: 7). Identity is formed by using these conceptual frameworks to make sense of the world and our place in that world. Burr states further that "when people talk to each other the world gets constructed" (Burr, 2003: 8). Identity and sense of self are built during

interactions between people. Identity encompasses a personal self and a social self, both of which may alter as a result of divorce (Gregson and Cayner, 2009).

In Ireland and elsewhere, marriage used to be seen, and possibly continues to be seen, as a woman's 'one shot' at a desirable life. "There was a time when most stories about girls simply ended with marriage: the prince and princess married and lived happily ever after" (Bateson, 1989:101). There were few choices to be made following marriage. "Marriage and child bearing became chapter headings in women's lives because of the way they produced or demanded an entire restructuring of life around commitments to others" (Bateson, 1989: 75). Women's entire identity was defined by being a wife and mother. Relationships with husbands and children became so central that they structured women's entire sense of self (Bateson, 1989:75).

Becoming a married woman or a nun or a 'spinster' used to be the only identities on offer for women in Ireland (O'Connor, 1998). The role definitions that women inherited in Ireland were shaped to fit a mainly rural world in which women had large families and did not work outside the home (Inglis, 1998). Prior to the 1960s, Irish women had few choices to construct a life that was different. Because being a wife and mother demanded so much of their time and energy, there was little space or expectation that Irish women would have a life or an identity outside of the private sphere, outside of their roles as wife and mother. As discussed already in Chapter 2 on *Understanding Irish Women*, this notion of the ideal woman, wife and mother was supported by a patriarchal state and a patriarchal Church (Inglis, 2005).

In the previous chapter, studies by van Schalkwyk (2005) and Gregson and Caynor (2009) on women's post-divorce identity shifts were described. The sense of confusion felt at no longer being part of a married couple, the sense of personal failure at not succeeding in marriage and the sense of fear for a future on their own were all mentioned by the women in the studies. Women who separate in midlife in Ireland are the first cohort of Irish women to openly separate at that stage of life in large numbers. As such, they may find themselves "on stage without a script....working out courses through unknown landscapes"

(Bateson, 2000:93). The void and the ambiguity caused by having no role models to guide them may add to the stress of separating (McGoldrick, 2005).

Bateson (2000) further illuminates why being the first generation to separate may be so stressful when she asserts that “when change affects one individual before it affects others, you see the ripples of turbulence but also the starting points of adaption and creativity at the margins” (p.93). The women in this study are at the margins of a social change, in the sense that they are the first generation to have access to legalised divorce, and, as such, are bound to experience what Bateson calls “ripples of turbulence” (p.93) but they also have the opportunity to begin to be creative. Van Schalkwyk (2005) and Gregson and Caynor (2009) found that there were positive shifts in identity taking place for women following divorce and that, after a period of time, they were able to embrace new opportunities and to assign more positive meanings to their past and future lives. This is the challenge facing Irish women who separate in midlife.

### **Individualisation**

Individualisation, as a characteristic of post-modern society (Giddens, 2006) is a meta-concept which includes de-traditionalisation and the emergence of greater individual choice. It is the opposite of embeddedness. According to this concept, there is a disembedding of social institutions. The argument is that individuals are increasingly free agents rather than being constrained by traditional structures like the Church, social class or kinship networks. The suggestion is that, in modern society, the bonds between people and their families and between people and their religious groupings have been loosened and that what exists now is a society of individuals who freely form relationships with other individuals untrammelled by the constraints of tradition and in pursuit of individual fulfilment.

Also according to this theory, biographies are changing. “Individualisation means that each person’s biography is removed from given determinations and placed in his or her own hands...the individual must learn to conceive of himself or herself as the centre of action” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:135). It is

argued that there is an ethic of individual self-fulfilment and responsibility (Giddens, 2006). Life chances and choices are no longer determined by family status (Beck, 1992). The idea of autonomy for each person has become a key concept in families.

Individualisation presumes liberation from gender roles. It presumes that each gender is free to fulfil their potential. Increased educational opportunities have led to more choices and more career opportunities for women. Women have more autonomy over their bodies. Due to the availability of contraception, there is a choice about getting pregnant. Women do not have to marry in order to have an income. The theory presumes that marriage no longer has to be the overriding goal in women's lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002).

However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) acknowledge that, for women, the individualisation process is incomplete. There is a general movement towards "a bit of a life of our own" but they describe this as a "complex multilayered and contradictory process" (p.55). As women were included in the labour market they became less dependent on their families but they became exposed to risks associated with the market place. Women are expected to be able to provide for themselves financially, as discussed when examining the lack of maintenance provided for women without dependent children. Yet, caregiving is still a major determining factor in their lives (Kittay, 2002; Lynch, 2007). Women's prospects are both more open and less protected than before (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Following separation, they may no longer have the protection of their husband or his extended family.

In an individualised society the rules, as laid down by families and religious institutions, that used to govern personal relationships no longer apply but "[a]s the traditions become progressively diluted, the promises of relationships grow. Everything that has been lost is suddenly being sought in the other" (Beck, 1992:113). Love is construed as the new centre around which people build their lives (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). In a world of uncertainty and risk, the search for love is real and the expectations of what loving the right person can yield are very high.

Giddens (2006) uses the concept of “confluent love” (rather than romantic love) to describe what he calls a “pure relationship”. “A pure relationship refers to a situation where a social relation is entered into for its own sake, for what can be derived by each person from a sustained association with another; which is continued only in so far as it is thought by both parties to deliver enough satisfaction for each individual to stay within it” (Giddens, 1992:58). Confluent love is not about finding “Mr.Right”, it is about finding a relationship in which “each gains sufficient benefits to make its continuance worthwhile” (Giddens, 2006:242). Each partner monitors “if they are deriving sufficient satisfaction from the relationship for it to go on” (p.242). The implication of this statement would be that people would separate if they did not feel fulfilled within their marriages.

The ideal of a “pure relationship” carries over into marriage. The focus has become what a marriage can do for the individual rather than the other way round. The marriage contract used to be a bill of rights. The man would provide the money and the woman would provide the care. Now it is “a signifier of commitment rather than a determinant of it” (Giddens, 1992:192). It is a rolling contract. It underlines the nature of the relationship but is open to negotiation. As quoted before, “[p]eople marry for the sake of love and divorce for the sake of love; they engage in an endless cycle of hoping, regretting and trying again” (Giddens, 2006:243). The point here is that people continue to believe in the possibility of finding love.

The dilemma becomes how to balance being liberated and at the same time being committed to an intimate relationship. It becomes a struggle to continue to merge two self-made biographies (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). As more women come to regard themselves as people with wishes of their own, the less they accept that these wishes are not fulfilled. “Women used to abandon their hopes, now they abandon their marriages” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995:62). The more women learn to fend for themselves, the less they are prepared to tolerate from their men and the more they are likely to initiate separation. The extent to which Irish women who separate in midlife embrace the notion of

individualisation will be interesting to examine. Whether they believe they are 'worth it' or 'not worthy' (Inglis 2007) will form part of the analysis of the data in chapters 6 and 7. Evidence of individualisation will form another of the lens through which the data in this study will be analysed

## **Conclusion**

A range of concepts from connectedness to fragmentation forms the framework for this study. Connectedness has to do with how people are connected to each other and to a network of other relationships through being joined in marriage. Fragmentation has to do with the break up of the couple relationship and the disruption of other relationships as a consequence of the separation. The study is concerned with identifying the extent to which a break up leads to isolation and fragmentation of former relationships for Irish women who separate in midlife or the extent to which connections are continued or reconstituted following separation for these women.

Connectedness and fragmentation are further broken down into related concepts of embeddedness, love labour, identity, transition and individualisation. Embeddedness is the opposite of individualisation. It is about the influence of the structures in society rather than being about individual freedom and agency. It emphasises how people are connected to each other through being embedded in shared family history, traditions and culture. It is about how family and cultural beliefs are internalised and effect how being 'different', in the context of this study, being separated, is experienced. This concept links very closely with the material presented in chapter 2 and the first part of chapter 3 on the specifically Irish influences on the meaning of marriage and separation for women who are currently in midlife.

Love labour is the concept that will be used to analyse data on marriages and marriage difficulties. The perspective taken is that love is a key component in discussions about marriage, that love is influenced by changes in the social construction of heterosexual relationships, that love involves a thinking and a

doing element, that love involves work and that difficulties in any or all of these areas can lead to separation.

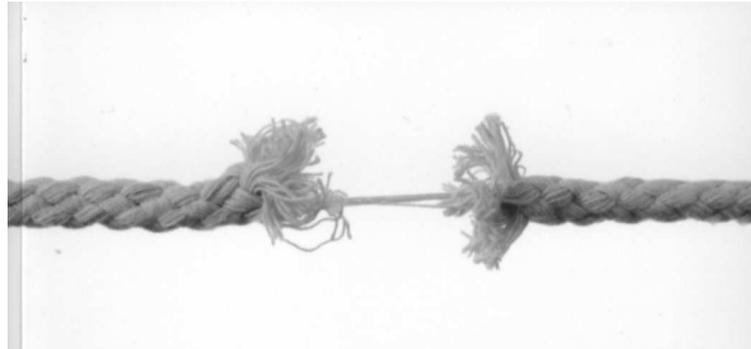
Transition captures the sense that separation involves a series of changes and adaptations in order to cope with a new situation. By its nature, transition entails experiencing endings and beginnings. The idea of endings encompasses the range of losses that are felt as part of the experience of separation. The sense of loss and grief is important to acknowledge in order to understand what separation feels like for the women who are going through it. The idea of beginnings refers to the notion that separation entails the hope of positive changes once the inevitable losses involved in separation have been adapted to.

Identity is linked with connectedness and it is also linked with individualisation. Identity is influenced by family and social class background. It is influenced by location, in this case, by what it means to be an Irish woman. It is influenced by age and agents of socialisation. It is influenced by marital status and by family and societal attitudes to people who are separated. As well as being composed of a social self, identity is also composed of a personal self. The challenge during separation is the retrieval of the self from the couple. This involves a personal journey which is influenced by the social context in which it is taking place.

Individualisation involves a belief in a right to personal happiness and fulfilment. This belief is at odds with what the women in this study would have been taught as children, but is much more in keeping with more recent messages on how women have a right to live their lives. The transition from traditional Ireland to modern Ireland has been characterised by a shift towards greater individualisation. It will be interesting to see what part individualisation played in the decisions of the women who initiated separation. It will also be interesting to see if those who did not initiate separation are able to make the transition to a more individualised identity.

The thread running through all these concepts is the thread from connectedness to fragmentation. The hope is that these concepts will facilitate capturing a rich and multi layered understanding of the experience of separation as opposed to a

flattened out and one dimensional explanation of the experience. The image below captures many of the aspects of connectedness and fragmentation which frame this study. Further discussion of the image takes place in the concluding chapter. This image is taken from the cover of (O'Hara, 2011) *When a Relationship Ends: Surviving the Emotional Roller-Coaster of Separation*, Dublin: Orpen Press.



## CHAPTER 5:

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

As mentioned, the aim of this study is to gain an understanding of the lived experience of Irish women who separate in midlife. As far as can be ascertained, no similar study on this topic has been done in Ireland. There has been research on the experience of children (Hogan *et al.*, 2002), on marital breakdown in general (Lunn *et al.*, 2009), on the experience of grandparents (Timonen *et al.*, 2009) and on post-separation parenting agreements (Mahon and Moore, 2011) but nothing on women in midlife. The overall objective of the study is to produce insights that increase the level of understanding of what life is like at the time of separating and after separation for women in midlife.

This methodology chapter outlines the assumptions about knowledge that underpin the study and considers the influence of feminism on how the study was conducted. It discusses the implications of taking a qualitative as opposed to a quantitative approach to the research. It describes and justifies the decisions that were made about how to select participants, how to conduct interviews and how to analyse the data. It refers to the positionality of the researcher and describes the manner in which ethical principles were adhered to throughout the project.

#### **Ontology, Epistemology and Methodology**

The practice of social science involves making choices between different research strategies (Flick, 2009). The choices are based on philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology) and about the ways in which knowledge about that reality can be arrived at (epistemology). According to May (1997), it is important to identify at the outset the assumptions that underpin research: “to use a building analogy, if we do not understand the foundations of our work, then we are likely to end up with a shaky structure” (May, 1997:3). This first section will deal with the ‘foundations’ or assumptions that underpin this particular study.

There are two broad traditions within social science; positivism and interpretivism. Positivists start from the belief that there is a real world 'out there' whose components can be examined and quantified. They hold that "there is a world that we can record and analyse independently of people's interpretations of it" (May, 1997:11). Interpretivists start from the belief that our ideas mediate what we see as 'real' and that it is not possible to separate experience from how we understand it. According to May (1997), "the only thing we can know with certainty is how people interpret the world" (May, 1997:13). Therefore, the only thing we can find out for certain is what people's interpretation is of an event or phenomenon. People act in accordance with their interpretation so that is the crucial aspect to understand.

This study on separation is located within an interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities, that researchers and participants co-create understandings and that these understandings can best be generated by using 'natural' methodological procedures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). The starting position of this research was a belief that understanding how women experience separation was an essential part in an overall understanding of the phenomenon and that multiple 'realities' existed in relation to how separation was experienced. It was assumed, following a feminist perspective which is discussed below, that there was a gendered aspect to the experience of separation and that women would experience separation somewhat differently than men. It was also assumed that in order to understand the nature of the experience that it should be studied from the perspective of those who were experiencing it. It should be studied from a subjective perspective and not from the perspective of the external world (Denscombe, 2010). Therefore, women who separated were seen as 'experts' on their own situation and it was assumed that their subjective accounts of separating could be represented by interviewing them and inviting them to describe events and practices in their day-to-day lives. Rather than the researcher being seen as being outside the process, it was acknowledged that the researcher had a role in 'co-creating' the understanding by the manner in which questions were asked, the interviews were conducted, data were interpreted and findings were presented.

Several aspects of the methodology were influenced by feminist perspectives on research. There is considerable debate about whether there is or is not a specifically feminist methodology (Harding, 1987; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Byrne and Lentin, 2000). The answer to this question, according to Harding (1987) is that there is not a distinctly feminist method of research but that feminist criticisms have led to significant changes in how research is conducted. Feminists have criticised research methods used in the past “for only producing partial and distorted views of lived experience” (Harding, 1987:1). Feminists claimed that research was conducted from a male perspective and assumed that male experiences equated to human experience. By focussing primarily on women’s experiences, an assumption is being made that there are gendered aspects to the experience of separating, in much the same way as there are gendered aspects to the experience of being married. Bernard (1982) talked about there being a difference between “his” marriage and “her” marriage which related to the social construction of each gender and to the structuring of heterosexual relationships. It is assumed, because of the social construction of gendered roles, that women have particular vantage points and perspectives which it is important to understand and to represent as a separate entity. There is, however, no assumption that the experience of separation is the same for all women or even for all Irish women who separate in midlife. The challenge is to capture the range of experience described and to represent it in all its complexity.

Many aspects of the methodology incorporated feminist influences. Feminism has resulted in many research practices being democratised. It has resulted in a more collaborative relationship with research participants, less focus on being objective, as was traditionally understood, and more openness about personal assumptions and beliefs (Maynard and Purvis, 1994). As will be seen from the discussion that follows, collaboration with the women and reflexivity on how the study was being carried out were the most important principles guiding how this piece of research was done.

## **Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies**

Denscombe (2010) talks about choosing ‘horses for courses’ when selecting research methods and that what matters most is the fit between the research method and the research question. According to Oakley (2005), the task is to figure out which method offers protection against the possibility of ending up with misleading answers and to try to answer the questions in a way that will aid understanding. A qualitative, as opposed to a quantitative, design was felt to be the most appropriate approach to use to answer the question about how these women experienced separation. Rather than focussing on gathering statistics or on establishing causal links between different variables related to marital breakdown, this study set out to describe the subjective accounts of the women who separated.

Qualitative research sets out to make an aspect of the world visible which was previously invisible. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003) “qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.5). They move from the personal to the political, from the local to the historical and the cultural” (p.7). As will be described later, the significance women attached to events, their personal and family histories, as well as the impact of Irish society on how they made sense of separation are all aspects that were included in the study.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) use various metaphors to describe how a qualitative researcher goes about making previously invisible aspects of the social world visible. They talk about the researcher as bricoleur (jack of all trades), as quilt maker, as film maker. Qualitative researchers use a range of skills and techniques to gather and to ‘stitch’ together different pieces of a picture. They assemble images (text and stories rather than figures and statistics) into montages and put different slices of ‘reality’ into a ‘frame’. Their approach acknowledges that there are potentially many “different voices, different perspectives and different angles of vision” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003:5) depending on who is being studied and who is conducting the study. The challenge is to figure out how to

adequately represent the many views of the women who took part in the study, how to 'frame' and present a picture of their experience that is credible and trustworthy. The conceptual framework was outlined in the previous chapter. The manner in which the concepts were decided upon and how they were used to analyse the data will be outlined later in this chapter.

Before proceeding to outline the details of how the study was conducted, the ways in which the topic was chosen will be described.

### **Choosing the Topic**

Byrne and Lentin (2000) state that there are some research projects that are "born of necessity" (p. 247). This was one such study. I started this D.Soc.Sc. in September 2007. My husband and I separated very suddenly on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2008. In the course of writing an essay on individualisation the following year, I came across some material on separation in midlife. While I had been struggling to maintain an interest in other topics, I had no difficulty reading material that discussed marital separation. At the time I was consumed with trying to make sense of what separation was about.

In an effort to access support for myself, I attended a post-separation course run by the Marriage Relationship Counselling Service (MRCS, currently called Relationships Ireland) in Dublin in November 2009. A separated friend also recommended a residential week-end course run by a group called Beginning Experience (B.E.) so I attended that course too, also in November 2009. I witnessed women in real distress and this distress seemed to be invisible to the wider population. Both courses were attended primarily by women who were aged over forty years of age, although they had not been advertised as being specifically for women, or specifically for women over forty. I figured that 'I was not alone' and that there was a phenomenon of which I had previously been unaware (prior to March 2008) and of which there was very little discussion in the media, or elsewhere, that warranted further study.

Being an ‘insider’, in the sense of having personal experience of separation, was, undoubtedly, a factor in many aspects of this study; from how I chose the topic, to how I gained access to the sample, to the questions that I asked, to the answers that the women gave, because they knew something of my story, to the way in which I analysed the data. A clear decision was made not to make this into an auto-ethnographic study. I was too fragile. I purposely did not refer to my own experience during the course of collecting the data. The objective was to tell the stories of the fourteen women who participated in the study, while also acknowledging the part my personal experience played in co-creating how those stories were told and how they were interpreted.

### **Selection of Participants**

In total, fourteen women were interviewed for this study. Twelve of the fourteen women who took part in the study were contacted as a result of having met them at the courses attended in November 2009. The remaining two participants who took part were recruited through informal contacts, using a method which research literature (Denscombe, 2010) refers to as ‘snowballing’. This was clearly not a representative sample of the entire population of women who are separated in the country, nor is it meant to be. It was a convenience sample which is defined by Bryman (2004) as “one that is simply available to the researcher by virtue of its accessibility” (p.100). I had contact details for all of the women who attended the courses and the following May I phoned women who I felt would remember me to ask if they would consent to take part in the study. It was not felt necessary to ask permission from the course organisers as each woman had volunteered to provide contact details and could decline to take part in the study if she wished. (This topic will be discussed further in the ethics section.) In the event, everybody contacted from the courses agreed to take part, as did the two women contacted through informal sources.

The criteria for inclusion in the sample were that the women identified themselves as separated and/or divorced, that they had grown up and were living in Ireland at the time of their separations and that they were aged over forty. By virtue of having attended a post-separation course, the women had identified

themselves as separated. While some had spent periods living abroad, they had all grown up and were all, currently and at the time of their separations, resident in Ireland. All of the participants were born between 1952 and 1963 and were aged between forty-five and fifty-seven at the time of the interviews.

It was apparent from the literature that women might experience separation differently if they belonged to different social class backgrounds or if they lived in a rural or an urban setting (Lunn *et al.*, 2009). There was also literature that contended that initiators and non-initiators might have different experiences of separation (Sakraida, 2005). Additionally literature (Amato, 2000) suggested that the particular events or processes which led to separation (addiction, violence or infidelity) had an effect on how separation was experienced. Keeping these factors in mind, an effort was made to include women from different social backgrounds, different locations around the country and to include both initiators and non-initiators. (Concern about preserving anonymity has led to a decision not to link the pseudonyms to locations or to family details in a tabular format. This is discussed in the section on ethical considerations.)

The backgrounds of the participants broke down as follows: based on their father's occupations, (three were skilled manual workers, six were non-manual workers, three were professionals and two were farmers) the women grew up in a variety of social class backgrounds. At the time of the interviews, eight of the women lived in Dublin. The remaining six lived in various locations around the country- Dundalk, Belfast, Kildare, Carlow, Waterford and Galway. Six of the women identified themselves as having initiated their separations. While the sample includes women from a variety of different living situations and with different histories, the selection of specific women was not done in a systematic manner and did not involve using a quota sampling procedure (Bryman, 2004; Sarantakos, 2005).

It was originally intended to interview just ten women, following Sarantakos' (2005) maxim that a sample must be "as large as necessary, and as small as possible" (p.170). In the course of the interviews, some of the women suggested that I include other women whose stories they thought were 'a bit different'. The

final number of interviews conducted was fourteen, which was felt to be more than adequate for a study of this size. It was also apparent that similar stories about experiences of separating were being repeated and that the data had become as large as it needed to be. Such was the generosity of the women that I could have accessed a far larger sample if I had needed to. It is not clear exactly what motivated the women to participate in the study. It could have been simply that they wished to support me in my efforts to get a doctorate or it could be that they too felt that there was an important story to tell which was previously untold.

As mentioned, the sample interviewed for this study is not presented as being a representative sample. The fact that they were taking part in a post-separation course at a counselling/peer support service may mark them out as different from separated women in general (Bryman, 2004). They may have been more distressed, had less support or been more proactive in accessing support. There is no way of knowing. No claims are being made as to the generalisability of the descriptions to a wider population. The only claim that is being made is that this study represents the stories of fourteen real women about their lives before, during and after separation.

### **Narrative Interviews**

Interviews were felt to provide the greatest possibility to explore this particular topic in an in-depth manner. They “privilege the accounts of social actors, agents, individuals, or subjects, as data sources and assume or emphasise the centrality of talk or text in our ways of knowing about the social world” (Mason, 2002: 225). Knowledge about the phenomenon of separation was believed to be located in the women’s lived experiences and life histories. The manner in which this knowledge could best be illuminated was believed to be by asking the women about events and processes in their lives (the details of which will be explained in what follows) which were connected to how they experienced separation.

The type of interviews conducted were semi-structured narrative interviews which, as I discovered subsequent to the fieldwork, were similar in many respects to what Flick calls “episodic interviews” (2009:185). Flick (2009) distinguishes between episodic knowledge and semantic knowledge. Episodic knowledge tends to be generated and illustrated in relation to specific episodes. Semantic knowledge relates more to the use of concepts to make sense of events. Both types of knowledge were sought in this study, but it was striking how often the women explained their experiences by describing in detail specific episodes in their lives which they felt best illustrated the stories of their separations.

Each interview started by taking the women through a demographic questionnaire which they had filled out in advance. The topic domains included family of origin details, education, awareness of separation during childhood, courtship, marriage and parenthood, events surrounding separation, life after separation and supports needed and availed of following separation (Appendix 1). It will be noted that the title on the questionnaire indicated that the study was about the supports women needed and accessed during their separations. An explanation of the reasons for the change in emphasis will be presented on page 110.

Each woman was asked to recount narratives about episodes in her life which were relevant to how she interpreted her separation, in a more or less chronological order. Lawler (2002) defines narratives as “accounts which contain transformation (change) over time, some kind of action and characters, all of which are brought together within an overall plot (p.242). The episodes asked about were all linked to a story of the women’s (changing) self concept and identity within marriage and following separation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the concept of identity and the changes in identity resulting from separation is a key concept which is traced throughout the study. The episodes were linked by events/‘actions’ that happened to them overtime. The ‘characters’ are their parents, brothers and sisters, husbands, his family, their children, friends and counsellors. Their unfolding lives are the main ‘plot’.

Lawler also sees narratives as ‘social products’ which are produced by people “within the context of specific social, historical and historical locations” (2002:242). She holds the view that narratives do not originate with the person. “They circulate culturally to provide a repertoire from which the person can produce their own stories....People are guided to act in certain ways and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations and memories derived from...available social, public and cultural narratives” (Lawler, 2002:242). This was the perspective that underpinned this study. It set out to explore how embedded the women were in both the external (cultural) narratives about marriage and separation in Ireland as well as the internal narratives which were influenced by each woman’s relationships and life experience, all of which combined to form a complex account of how the women understood and explained their separations.

It was through the use of story telling that these multi-layered accounts were garnered. Using narratives provides a way to explain in detail about events, the meaning of events (Smart, 2007), the feelings that accompany events and how people make sense in retrospect of events (Mason, 2002). Research which uses narratives asks not just what happened but also about the significance of what happened. Narratives link the past and the present. They link the personal and the cultural. “They are a means by which people connect together past and present, self and other” (Lawler, 2002:242). As explained in the previous chapter, the theme of connectedness runs throughout this study. Making the connections between past and present, self and other was an essential part of what these interviews were attempting to encompass.

Many of the theoretical underpinnings which were acknowledged in Smart (2007) can be seen in how the questions were asked in this study (Morgan, 1996, Finch and Mason, 2000; Gillis, 1996, 2004) The approach taken was to ask the women to describe specific events rather than asking them about abstract concepts. For example, rather than asking them what they felt caused their marriages to break down, they were asked to tell the stories of their marriages and to describe the specific events that preceded their separations (what one woman described as the ‘tipping point’ event). There were stories about

'holidays from hell' which were recounted to illustrate signs of relationship problems. There were stories about bereavements and illness which illustrated times when they felt a lack of support. There were stories about blurting out that they wanted a separation in answer to questions about whether to buy a new dining room table or where to go on holidays. Questions were invariably answered with a story which clearly illustrated what happened but also how they and others felt about what happened. Separation was viewed as a process that is lived everyday in routine practices (Morgan, 1996). The women were asked about their everyday practices which illustrated how they did separation. Rather than asking abstract questions about how relationships were negotiated (Finch and Mason, 2000) following separation, questions were asked about family practices around family events such as Christmas, birthdays, graduations, weddings and funerals (Gillis, 1996, 2004).

Abstract questions were also asked. All of the women had been to counselling and were well used to trying to figure out underlying reasons for why things happened and why they felt the way they did. They were well able to answer questions at an abstract level and to draw insight from the details that made up their daily encounters. That the women had been to counselling or had attended post-separation courses may partly explain why the interviews yielded such rich data. These women were used to telling their stories and trying to put the pieces together to make sense of what had happened to them and why they felt the way they did.

Each interview finished with an open question (Byrne and Lentin, 2000) which asked the women if they were sitting in the researcher's chair and were trying to grasp the story of their separation, if there was anything else that might help to explain things. One woman replied that she had already told me her whole life story. Others used the opportunity to portray a message that said "this is who I am now. I have survived, I have been scarred by, learned from and transcended a very tough episode in my life....." The final messages were all about resilience in the face of adversity.

The interviews took place in locations that best suited the women. In most cases I travelled to their homes. Where this was not suitable because of children being at home, interviews took place in nearby hotels or work places. The interviews typically lasted between eighty and one hundred and twenty minutes. Each interview was tape recorded. I initially suggested that I could do a second interview if anyone wished to clarify or change any ideas they had expressed. Nobody took up the option for a follow up interview.

A commitment was given to either email or post a copy of the entire transcripts to the women once they were complete, as is recommended as part of feminist methodologies (Byrne and Lentin, 2000). This was in the spirit of ensuring that the participants were happy with the content of the interviews. Most of the women were slow to read the transcripts and mentioned how painful they found it to read their stories. Those who did read them changed very little, mainly words that had been heard incorrectly.

### **Choosing a Familiar Methodology and a Familiar Topic**

According to Silverman (2000) there is much to be gained from choosing a methodology and a topic that are familiar to the researcher. He claims that both need to make sense to the researcher. Years of working as a social worker meant that I was very experienced at conducting interviews on very difficult and sensitive topics. Knowledge of interview techniques was a very definite strength when it came to data collection for this study as evidenced by the richness of the material gathered.

Rather than personal experience of the phenomenon to be studied being seen as a weakness in that it may bias the entire research process, several writers discuss how it may be used as a strength (May, 2002; Silverman, 2000). May (2002) talks about how people attach meanings to events and how the meanings they attach are constructed, practiced and changed within cultures. He claims that the way we understand social life is by being part of it and belonging within it. I was part of and belonged to many of the same settings as described by the women in this study. I share a similar background and upbringing to many of the women. I

learned what was expected of women in an Irish context. I listened to whispered conversations about people whose marriages had broken down and understand the meaning that was given to separation in this culture. I understand from the 'inside' what it feels like to separate in Ireland as a woman in midlife. May (2002) says that researchers can use their understanding as a starting point from which to push on and learn more. They can both utilize and challenge their own understanding as they engage in a reflexive style of conducting research. This was the approach taken in this study.

Hume (2007) also explains the benefits of 'insider' positionality in an article in which she describes how her experience of growing up during the 'troubles' in Derry informed how she understood women's experience of violence in El Salvador. She felt her personal experience gave her a more nuanced understanding of what it was like to live everyday with the threat of violence, how she adapted to it, how it became normalised and how she reacted defensively to other people's negative description of her home town. She used her experience of violence to understand why, during the interviews, some women were reluctant to be open with a stranger about the reality of the violence they experienced, how they seemed to accept it as part of their 'normal' lives and why they became defensive when strangers described their situations in a different manner than they did. Her argument is that rather than trying to be objective and guard against being biased by emotional reactions to research topics, that emotion should be central to building a richer understanding of whatever is being studied. The hope is that my insider knowledge of separation has led to rich data being collected and to data being analysed in a manner that adds to an understanding of the experience of separation.

### **Processes used in the Analysis of the Data**

The transcripts for the fourteen interviews constitute the data set on which analysis was conducted. Silverman (2000) lays more emphasis on the analysis of the data than on successfully collecting the data. He claims that the most important aspect of research is what is done with the data. Qualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions are valuable (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). However,

this may result in data which are “voluminous, messy, unwieldy and discursive” (Spencer *et al.*, 2003:202). The raw data which was collected for this study consisted of fourteen transcripts each with approximately twelve and a half thousand words (14x 12,500). The total word count was in excess of one hundred and seventy-five-thousand words (175,000). I typed ten of the fourteen transcripts myself but, due to time constraints, I paid to have the remaining four tapes transcribed, ensuring that the women’s anonymity would be protected by changing all identifying details and stressing the importance that confidentiality be respected.

The analysis focussed on the content of the stories told rather than on why the stories were told in the manner in which they were told. The method of analysis used followed the thematic framework method as described in Richie *et al.* (2003). This is a “matrix based method for ordering and synthesising data” (Richie *et al.*, 2003:219). Using this method, data was organised around a thematic framework which was built from the raw data. The themes largely followed the topic guide that had been used for the questionnaire and the interviews. The seven main themes were subdivided further according to the topics which were present in the transcripts, as shown below.

**Table 1: Thematic Framework**

<b>Thematic Framework for the Study</b>
<b>1. Family of origin/ Childhood</b>
1.1 Location (rural/urban)
1.2 Size of family
1.3 Father’s occupation
1.4 Mother’s occupation
1.5 Religious observance
1.6 Education (own and sibs)
1.7 Issues in family (illness, death...)

<b>2. Awareness of Separation during Childhood</b>
2.1 No knowledge
2.2 Happened to celebrities
2.3 Happened to foreigners who lived here
2.4 Happened to Irish who lived abroad
2.5 Other family members separated
2.6 Awareness of unhappy marriages
2.7 Other
<b>3. Leaving Home Stage</b>
3.1 Occupation
3.2 Study
3.3 Migration/travel
3.4 Courtship
3.5 Pregnancy
3.6 Pre marital sex
3.7 Other
<b>4. Marriage and Parenthood</b>
4.1 Timing/number of children
4.2 Experience with first child
4.3 Resentment/contentment with division of tasks
4.4 Impact of work/lack of work
4.5 Quality of couple relationship
4.6 Method of resolving conflict
4.7 Sexual relationship
4.8 Significant events (death/illness of parents/holidays)

<b>5. Events/Processes Leading to Separation</b>
5.1 Attempts at counselling
5.2 Previous separations
5.3 Emotional infidelity
5.4 Sexual infidelity
5.5 Woman as initiator/ reasons
5.6 Blurting it out/ moving out
5.7 Initial reactions of husband
5.8 Initial reactions of wife
5.9 Initial reactions of children
<b>6. Life After Separation</b>
6.1 Legal settlements
6.2 House
6.3 Income/maintenance
6.4 Relationship with ex
6.5 Mother's relationship with children
6.6 Father's relationship with children
6.7 Family Events
6.8 Social life/ New Partners
6.9 Other (Making sense of separation)
<b>7. Supports</b>
7.1 Family reaction/support
7.2 Friends as supports
7.3 Work colleagues as support
7.4 Counselling
7.5 Mediation
7.6 B.E/ M.R.C.S. attendance
7.7 Other supports

At this stage of the analysis, the emphasis in the research began to change slightly. The original objective of the study had been to explore the women's

experiences of the supports they needed and were able to access following separation. However, in the course of the interviews all aspects of separating were discussed. The richest and greatest volume of data collected described what the women's lives were like before, during and after the process of separation, rather than just outlining who or what supported them through the process. Given the richness of the data that had been generated, it was decided to focus on the myriad lived experiences of separation. It is these experiences, rather than the narrower theme of support, that form the key data which this thesis analyses.

Early stage analysis was mainly at a descriptive level. Some of the literature which had been reviewed was integrated with findings that were emerging from the data. Verbatim extracts were cited to illustrate points being made, to ensure that the women's voices were heard and to retain the richness and flavour of the raw data.

Silverman (2000) claims that social science research is almost impossible without theory and that "theory only becomes useful when it is used to explain something" (p.85). The next stage of analysis involved the use of the theoretical concepts discussed in the last chapter in analysing the descriptions written up in the early stage analysis documents.

There are many different ways of looking at separation. As mentioned, the approach taken in this study was, for the most part, based on the approach taken by Smart (2007). Smart used findings from a number of empirical studies to challenge the dominance of the individualisation thesis as an explanation for divorce and the dominance of the belief that fragmentation in family relationships invariably resulted in the wake of divorce. Smart (2007) presented an alternative thesis which she called 'the connectedness thesis' and suggested that research on separating families should look for evidence of connectedness and not just of fragmentation. She contended that empirical studies showed that people re-negotiated relationships and that continued connectedness, albeit in a different form, was a feature of how people 'did' family following separation. Smart (2007) stressed not only the 'doing' of family practices but also the thinking and imagining about family relationships. She combined a number of

concepts, for example, memory, biography, embeddedness, relationality and imaginary within the overall framework for her 'connectedness thesis'. Following Smart's approach, a 'tool box' of concepts, which 'fitted' best with the areas this study was interested in exploring, was assembled under the overall framework of connectedness and fragmentation and used as the lenses through which the data in this study were analysed. Embeddedness was the only concept borrowed directly from Smart. It was used to explore the women's embeddedness in the views of their families and of Irish society in relation to separation.

It proved difficult to find a single concept that encapsulated the processes that led to difficulties in the women's marriages. Love labour (Lynch, 2007), as a concept, was only decided upon in retrospect. It was chosen because it seemed to capture so many aspects in the 'doing' or not 'doing' of love within the women's accounts of their marriages and of the processes which they felt led to their separations.

The concept of transition is commonly used in the literature on separation and divorce (Amato, 2000; Bateson, 2000; Ahrons, 2005). The decision was taken to emphasise the concept of loss as part of the concept of transition in order to reflect approaches used in practice-based orientations.

Identity, like transition, is a concept which is commonly used when analysing experiences of separation (Bateson, 1989; van Schalkwyk 2005; Gregson and Caynor, 2009). Exploring identity and possible difficulties with losing identity as part of a married couple were felt to be particularly pertinent in an Irish context.

As already explained, the initial idea to choose this topic partly arose in the context of reading the works of individualisation theorists Giddens (2006), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995; 2002). Their explanations of divorce in midlife sparked an interest in exploring whether their thesis of individualisation applied to Irish women who separated in midlife. As mentioned, these five concepts were underpinned by the concepts of connectedness and fragmentation and served to locate the study within current debates about changing intimate relationships.

## **Ethical Considerations**

The ethical principles adhered to were the principles laid down by the Sociological Association of Ireland (<http://www.sociology.ie>). The first ethical issue that arose was whether it was in order to use contact details for research purposes which had been given for support purposes. Women had voluntarily given contact details at the end of the post-separation courses with a view to being available if other women needed them or if they needed to talk to somebody. The details were given in an effort to provide an informal peer support network if anybody needed further support. I had attended the courses as a participant, not as a researcher. Material discussed at the courses did not form part of the data for this study.

I did not contact the women about the research until six months after the courses took place. As discussed, it was not necessary to get permission from the agencies that had run the courses, as the women had previously given me their contact details themselves, albeit for a different reason. The women were all adults and were under no obligation or pressure to agree to take part. I followed up the initial phone calls by sending information (Appendix 2) about what the study entailed, as well as consent forms (Appendix 3) and questionnaires (Appendix 1) which needed to be filled out prior to the interviews.

As already stated, interviews took place at times and in locations that best suited the women. Confidentiality was the primary factor that the women needed to be assured of. As became very apparent from the stories the women told about how they dealt with the difficulties in their marriages, they had not generally spoken about their marriage problems to anybody, other than a counsellor or a trusted family member. McKeown *et al.* (2004) and O'Connor (2001) had both identified that by the time people came to marriage counselling their problems were often at such an advanced stage that it was almost too late for any remedial help. Marital problems are socially constructed as very private matters that the women would not want anybody to know about. Maintaining confidentiality was vital.

Assuring anonymity was also essential. Ireland is a very small country when it comes to people knowing other people. If the women's names, their husbands' names, their children's names and their locations were not changed, it might be possible for them to be identified. Each woman has been given a pseudonym. Names were picked which began with the first fourteen letters of the alphabet and which were commonly used names for girls born in Ireland in 1950s and 1960s. All identifying details have been altered. The women consented to the interviews being taped. They needed to be assured that the tapes would remain securely in my possession. They consented to excerpts from their interviews being published. They needed to know that all identifying information would be changed. One woman became uncomfortable about something she had said on tape and asked for the interview to be re-done. I handed her the original tape so that she could destroy it and we did the interview again.

Asking the women to discuss what went wrong in their marriages and asking them to re-live painful events around the time of their separations was likely to be upsetting for the women. As mentioned, my background was in social work so I was very aware of the need to ensure that the women had support, if needed, following the interviews. As it transpired, most of the women had counsellors they attended whom they could call upon. I also left my contact details if any of the women wanted to follow up on any issues that had come up during the interviews. I checked with each of the women before I left them that they were feeling okay. No major upsets occurred during the interviews. The most worrying incident was when one woman recounted details of a suicide attempt she had made. She assured me that she was still attending a psychiatric service where she could discuss the incident and that she had friends she could call on. I contacted her later that evening and again the next day. As mentioned, I sent each woman a copy of her transcript and edited them as requested. I invited them to contact me if they had any concerns.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the assumptions upon which this work is based and the way in which the study was conducted. The study is based on an interpretivist approach to the construction of knowledge. It is based on the assumption that there are multiple ‘realities’ and that these ‘realities’ can be learned about by asking people to talk about their experience. The perspective taken is that how people experience a phenomenon is the key influence on how they feel and how they behave.

Feminist perspectives informed many of the decisions taken about how this study was conducted. The decision to confine the study to women’s experience was based on feminist contentions about how invisible women’s experiences have been in research conducted in the past (Harding, 1987). The collaborative and reflexive approach taken to the collection of the data was heavily influenced by feminist approaches to research (Harding, 1987; Maynard and Purvis, 1994; Byrne and Lentin, 2000).

The overall design was to use a qualitative approach and to carry out an exploratory study into women’s experience of separation in Ireland. In-depth interviews of a narrative type were conducted in which fourteen women were invited to tell their stories about their experience of separation. It was acknowledged that the small size of the sample meant that findings could not be generalised to a larger population. The stories the women told consisted of a mainly chronological account of events which mapped their lives from childhood, through marriage and through separation. Ethical considerations, in particular the need for informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality, were adhered to throughout the project.

The data were analysed thematically at first and then reconfigured in line with the underlying concepts used for the study, as will be shown in the following two chapters.

## CHAPTER 6:

### Early Influences and Experiences during Marriage

#### Introduction

This chapter will present the data and discussion on the early years of the women's lives up to the point at which they got married. The next chapter will present the data on the events that triggered separation and on the processes that occurred as a result of separation. Data will be presented mainly in the form of direct quotations from the women. In order not to distract from the flow of the quotations, discussion pieces will be located at the end of each section.

Concepts, as described in chapter 4 on the *Theoretical Framework* for the study, ranging from connectedness to fragmentation will be used in this chapter in the discussion of the women's childhood, young adulthood and experiences during marriage. Embeddedness is the main concept used in the discussion of the women's childhood years. It refers to connectedness to family and to society. It includes connectedness across generations in families through shared history, linked biographies, shared places and shared beliefs (Smart, 2007). Identity is another of the concepts used. It is linked to embeddedness and connectedness in the sense that identity is constructed within families and within societies. When the women in this study were children, individual identity was very much linked to family identity (O'Connor, 1998; Inglis, 2003). Identity can also change with stages in an individual's life course. A tension between embeddedness in family and a desire for individualisation, another of the concepts used in the study, can be seen in some of the accounts of the women's young adult years. Individualisation is closely associated with fragmentation and a loosening from the ties of family. The use of the concept of love labour will be outlined when discussing the women's experiences during marriage.

#### Childhood

This section will begin by presenting a table containing background details on the fourteen women who were interviewed for this study. As mentioned in the chapter on methodology, each woman was given a pseudonym. Occupations and locations are broadly described in order to protect anonymity. The chapter will

discuss the data generated about the women's lives up to the point at which they got married. It will describe aspects of their early lives and what they identified as the key influences during childhood on their understanding of marriage and marital separation. It will set the scene for discussions on the ways in which the women were embedded in socio-cultural norms about women and the place of marriage and family in women's lives (O'Hara, 1997; Inglis, 1998, 2003; O'Connor, 1998).

**Table 2: Profile of the Women during Childhood**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Year of Birth</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Father's Occupation</b>	<b>Mother's Occupation</b>	<b>Number of Children</b>	<b>Religion</b>	<b>Education Prior to Marriage</b>
<b>Anne</b>	1955	Rural	Non manual	Housewife	7	Catholic	Third level
<b>Breda</b>	1958	City	Skilled manual	Housewife	5	Catholic	Inter cert
<b>Catherine</b>	1953	City	Non manual	Housewife	3	Catholic	One year at third level
<b>Deidre</b>	1955	Rural	Farmer	Teacher	4	Catholic	Third level
<b>Eileen</b>	1954	Town	Professional	Housewife	7	Catholic	Third level
<b>Frances</b>	1957	City	Professional	Housewife	5	Catholic	Third level
<b>Geraldine</b>	1961	City	Non manual	Housewife	2	Catholic	Second level
<b>Helen</b>	1961	City	Non manual	Housewife	3	Catholic	Second level
<b>Irene</b>	1955	Rural	Farmer/ shop owner	Shopkeeper	5	Catholic	Third level
<b>Jane</b>	1963	City	Skilled Manual	Housewife	4	Catholic	Second level
<b>Kay</b>	1959	Rural	Professional / farmer	Housewife/ farmer	7	Catholic	Third level
<b>Lisa</b>	1953	City	Non manual	Shopkeeper	5	Catholic	Third level
<b>Mary</b>	1961	City	Non manual	Housewife	9	Catholic	Third level
<b>Nora</b>	1957	Rural	Skilled Manual	Housewife	7	Catholic	Inter cert

### **Family of Origin Details**

As shown in Table 2, fourteen women were interviewed for this study. All of the women were born and raised in Ireland, as were their parents. The women in the sample were born between 1952 and 1963. Half of the women spent their childhoods in Dublin, four grew up on farms in Cork, Louth, Leitrim and Galway and the remaining three lived in urban areas in Offaly, Kildare and Waterford. Ten of the fourteen participants came from families that had between four and eight children. Families of this size would have been the norm in the 1950s and 1960s in Ireland but would have been considered large by international standards (Fahey and Field, 2008). All of the women's parents in this study were married and living together, none were separated. Research (Clarke and Bennington, 1999) shows a link between parents being divorced and their children going on to divorce. No such link was possible in Ireland given that divorce was banned until 1997. Two of the women mentioned that their husband's parents were separated. Two women mentioned that there were alcohol and related problems in their families of origin. Other women mentioned that there were relationship problems in their husbands' families but, apart from the two mentioned, no separations. At a public level at any rate, all of the women came from 'intact' families.

Eleven of the women described their mothers as full-time mothers and housewives. This is in line with Clear's (2001) statement that in 1961, 93.7% of married women were "engaged in home duties" (p.18). Of the other three mothers, one was a teacher and two were shopkeepers. These, again, are occupations identified by Clear (2001) as important exceptions to the rule that mothers did not work outside the home. Clear (2001) states that the midwife, the teacher, the shopkeeper and the postmistress were important, independent, authoritative figures in communities.

The fathers' occupations included three skilled manual workers, six non-manual workers, three professionals and two farmers. Some of the men had two occupations; teaching as well as farming, running a shop as well as farming, managing another farm as well as running their own farm.

Based on the women's descriptions of their families during the interviews, it was clear that there were significant differences in the standards of living enjoyed during childhood by the fourteen women. However, in the vast majority of cases, the family backgrounds described followed a traditional male breadwinner model with the husband out at work and the wife at home taking care of the children and engaging in household and farm duties. This was the norm in Ireland at the time (Fahey and Field, 2008).

### **Catholic Upbringing**

What was common to all the women in the study was that they were all raised as Catholics but, in this respect too, there were variations in the extent to which they felt their parents were influenced by the Catholic Church. They ranged along a continuum from those who were very traditionally Catholic, 'country Catholic' as Lisa called them, with priests and nuns in the extended family to those who went to Mass on Sundays but were otherwise not "religious in any way." Two of the women, Breda and Lisa, mentioned that they had Protestant grandparents which, they thought, resulted in more liberal views about religion in their particular families. In the following quotation Anne clearly fits the category that Lisa described as 'country Catholic'.

Anne: They were very religious. He had two sisters who were nuns and they were very much 'what the church said was law'. My mother wasn't as strict. I think she could see there were flaws in it but of course she went along with whatever her husband said. That was the way but she wouldn't have been 'died in the wool', she wouldn't have been ruled by it so much, whereas my father's family were very traditional.

Anne was clearly aware that, even between her parents, there were differences in adherence to Catholic beliefs. She could see that her mother had some reservations about the dominance of the Catholic Church but that, in keeping with the patriarchal thinking at the time, her mother publically supported her husband's views. Anne explains her father's devotion by the fact that he had so many relations who were nuns and priests. His family were deeply embedded in Catholicism and his children were expected to live by the same moral code, since

status and identity came from family affiliation rather than from individual personalities in rural Ireland at that time (Inglis, 2003).

Lisa tells a different story about the place of formal Catholic practices in her house when she was growing up.

Lisa: They weren't holy, holies, like Mom wouldn't go to Mass everyday. They'd be religious, like going on Sundays...but there was no saying the rosary, there were no holy pictures, statues. There would have been one or two nice little china statues, but no chalky big statues. She got rid of the sacred heart picture. Not any of what I would think as country Catholic. Dad's family was Protestant originally, and his mother converted, Mom's being inner city Dublin, kind of, it was Catholic, but not country Catholic, you know.

Lisa went on to marry a man who was 'country Catholic' so she was acutely aware of the differences in how central religion was in his family compared to her family.

The key point is that all of the women were brought up in families that were practising Catholics, in the sense that they all went to Mass on Sundays. Their stories show differences in the extent to which Catholicism dominated their daily lives. For some, being a Catholic involved going to Mass on Sundays (and being educated by nuns, as discussed below). For others, particularly those brought up in rural areas, Catholic practices, Catholic images and Catholic priests and nuns were defining aspects of their family lives.

### **Access to Education**

Twelve of the fourteen women attended Catholic, single-sex secondary schools. The remaining two attended vocational schools. Two of the women left school at fifteen and sixteen respectively, having completed their Inter Certificate, the state exam taken in the third year of the second level cycle. The remainder completed Leaving Certificate, the final state exam taken at the end of the second level cycle. Three of the sample attended boarding schools. Six proceeded directly to third-level education following secondary school. Four of the six who went to third-level came from families in which one of their parents had also been to

third-level. This is indicative of how middle class many of the women in the study were.

Most of the women spoke positively about their experience of school during the 1960s and 1970s:

Kay: It was a single-sex, girl's school, a convent. It was fine, I enjoyed it. I really liked it. Got a bus in every day, I wasn't particularly sporty, the school didn't have many facilities like that, but we did well, it was a pleasant school, we liked going there and we felt we were liked by the teachers.

Mahon (1994) and Clear (2001) concluded that the education of girls was taken as seriously as the education of boys, but with different subjects being deemed as more suitable for girls. As will be illustrated, the women were more conscious of a class bias in education than a gender bias.

Some of the women were at school in 1969 when 'free' secondary education was introduced, prior to which fees had been charged for attendance at secondary school. They also remembered the advent of free school transportation in 1969. This was a scheme whereby any child who lived more than three miles from their nearest school was entitled to free bus transport to school. Anne, who was the youngest in a family of eight and the only one to go to University in 1978, talked about how opportunities for education opened up for her but had not been available for her older siblings:

Anne: My older brothers and sisters had to go to work and did not get a chance to get educated. We were in such a rural area and there was no transport or anything much. One of them did cycle about seven miles to the nearest secondary school and he did an apprenticeship, the two other lads didn't. And then my sisters, they would have also cycled, not quite as far, to get a bus. By the time I came along, the transport was there so I was able to go to school and then I had a wonderful teacher. Only for her

I wouldn't have gone to third level because my family didn't know anything about it really.

Mary, who was also the youngest of a large family and grew up in Dublin, told a similar story:

Mary: I'm the only person in my family who went to third level. I'm the only person I knew in my whole entire neighbourhood who went to third level. Most people left school after the junior cert or inter cert as it was then, if even that. A lot of the girls did secretarial work, that type of thing or maybe factory work. When my older brothers and sisters started school there was no free education so they would all have had to get scholarships. By the time I came to go to secondary they had just introduced free education.

It is apparent from these extracts that the women in this study lived through a period of significant development in Irish life. They were conscious of having increased educational opportunities because they could compare their experience to the experience of their older brothers and sisters. The clearest indicator of the change in opportunities was that they could remain on at secondary school and some of them were the first ones in their families and in their neighbourhoods to attend third level education. Looking back, they were aware of living through a period of social change in which greater opportunities were afforded to young people from poorer backgrounds than in previous generations.

### **Attitudes to Marital Separation**

In order to gain an understanding of what separation meant to the women in the sample, it was important to gather information about the attitudes to separation that they would have encountered when they were growing up. When the women were asked what knowledge they had of separation when they were growing up, they were unanimous in saying that they had almost no knowledge of it. This was almost the only point during the entire fourteen interviews about which all of the women were so definite. This is a good example of the kind of sameness in terms of experience that Inglis (2008) claimed existed amongst Irish people.

Deidre: When I was growing up it just wasn't on the radar at all. People just didn't separate in those days. That was my experience. I was probably in my twenties before I was aware of any acquaintance separating.

Kay: My parents didn't feel comfortable talking about it at all. There was one man who came to dinner once, and I remember all through the meal he was teased. He wore a beard, and "kissing a man with a beard was like salt" something like that. And they were so embarrassed afterwards when they discovered that actually he was separated. But the people who brought him obviously didn't feel comfortable telling them he was separated, so I'd say it was a big, big thing.

For Deidre, separation did not exist during her childhood. She knew nobody who was separated. Kay was aware, even as a child, that separation was a subject that adults were uncomfortable talking about and it was a taboo subject to be avoided. However, awareness of marriages that everybody knew were unhappy was mentioned by several of the women. What they seemed to be stressing was that unhappy marriages had always existed, at a private level, just that the threshold at which a separation could be triggered in the past was extremely high. The expectation was that people stayed together no matter what difficulties they encountered and if they did separate for a while, efforts would be made to get them back together again.

Eileen: I remember my mother had one friend whose marriage was very difficult. I was aware that some marriages were very difficult....but there was no separation. People just stayed together, they stayed together. They had this marriage certificate that said 'til death do us part', regardless of what occurred.

Catherine: None of my parents' friends were separated. I had one cousin who was separated for a while but they got back together.

There also seems to have been a suggestion that there was something morally weak, something deviant or different about someone that separated as the following extract illustrates:

Geraldine: My mother has a god-child and she separated from her husband (when I was young). My mother was devastated. She was broken hearted. She took it nearly personally but afterwards when my mother was telling my father about it, it was more or less “well, she wasn’t a very strong person. She was always a bit flighty”.

There also seems to be an insinuation in the above quotation that the woman separated because she was not morally strong. Mahon (1994) stated that building women’s moral strength was a key objective of religious run-education. The presumption seems to have been that girls would be held responsible for upholding high moral standards within their families.

Another theme that emerged during this discussion was that separation was something that happened to non-Irish people who lived here or in other countries, possibly to celebrities or to Irish people that lived abroad.

Eileen: There was an English student whose parents were separated but that wasn’t ever spoken about either. Because she was English, it didn’t have any effect on us at all.

Geraldine: Any of the celebrities (it didn’t happen to us or people like us) or any of the people on the news who were divorcing or separating, they were frowned upon. It really was frowned upon and it wasn’t the done thing.....My father used to always say, not just about marriage but about anything “if you join, you must soldier.” So no matter what you signed up to and particularly if you signed up to Holy Matrimony, you stuck with it. As far as he was concerned, and my mother as well (they had more or less the same view), they frowned on it.

Kay: Both my parents had brothers and sisters whose marriages had broken down abroad, but they were not referred to, ever. And in one case

where my mother's brother's marriage (had broken down), it happened just for a year or two and then they got back together, she refused to admit it was happening, and when we spoke to her about it (we were in our twenties then) she still refused to talk about it. It was too big a thing. It was a major failure. And that was the one time we tackled her because my uncle came home with his daughter, and his daughter said: "you know my Mom and Dad are separated" and we hadn't known. It just wasn't mentioned. And when you tried to say it to her, she practically told us that the daughter was telling us lies. She didn't want to talk about it.

Jane stated that she had only just made the connection during the interview between how upset she felt about her separation and the manner in which she had heard separation discussed during her childhood;

Jane: I was in primary school and it was two girls in the class; one girl's mother went off with this girl's father, and to me, my god! And to this day I still look at these people and think that that was horrific, but that's gas, because looking at them now maybe that had a lot to do with the way I felt when my husband left that the whole town was talkin' about me. It was so horrific back then, the shame of it. Now that's only after dawning on me now. That's the connection I'm only after making, talking to you now.

These extracts show that the women were very clear that the message they had been given during their childhood was that separation was something 'horrific'. It was too awful to talk about. It only happened in Hollywood or to non Irish (non Catholic?) people living here. It certainly did not happen in 'respectable' Irish families and if it did happen, it often was not spoken about or it was denied. There was a clear stigma attached to separation. It was so awful that it had to be kept secret and those who tried to discuss its existence in their families were silenced. Being Irish and Catholic meant that you did not separate. To separate would be to be 'other', 'not like us' and to be somehow deviant or a failure.

## **Leaving Home - Identity Formation in Young Adulthood**

As mentioned, six of the sample went either to university or to teacher training college directly from school. One of these dropped out of college in order to get married at age twenty. Two of the women went abroad as au pairs, one to Paris and one to Brussels, before going on to train as nurses, one in Dublin and one in London. The other women worked as secretaries, telephonists or shop assistants either in towns close to their homes or in Dublin. The practice of migrating from the country to Dublin in search of work or for study was common for young women at the time. Emigration was also common (Hill, 2003). Four of the fourteen women lived abroad for a number of years at different stages of their lives.

For some of the women, there was a sense of freedom and a desire for adventure in how they lived their lives as young adults. They were able to leave home and lead their own lives in their own way where previously they would have been under their parent's direction.

Irene: When I left school I came to Dublin. I worked in the Civil Service for a while, hated it. I did many jobs, worked as a waitress, worked as a bar maid, lots of things, trying to find what I wanted to do in life. Then I went to Paris as an au pair for eighteen months, which I loved. But after eighteen months, I wanted to go again so I went via London and I knew people in London who were doing nursing. I got an interview and I started nursing.

There is a sense of excitement and freedom about how Irene describes these years. She had grown up in rural Ireland, spent five years in boarding school and was ready for adventure. Anne was also ready for adventure but due to family illness had to cut her travels short.

Anne: I didn't really want to stay in Ireland. I wanted to spread my wings. I was dying to travel. One of my sisters had gone. The first year after I qualified, I worked as a language assistant in France for a year. Then I

didn't want to come home, so I came home for a while and I moved onto Spain then. I loved Spain. I loved learning Spanish. I was very happy there. I came home the following summer and my father got very sick, he had a stroke. So, I didn't go back after that. I felt, being the youngest I should stay at home and give them a hand out.

The impact of a parent's death and notions about family obligation and the female role in caring were common themes in the women's stories. Anne obviously felt a strong sense of obligation to return home to help take care of her father when he was ill, despite the fact that she had been enjoying life abroad. She also felt that because she was the youngest and still single that she should be the one to help her when her father became ill.

For Kay, there was not quite the same sense of freedom or choice. She could leave home to complete her studies and to work but travel and buying her own house or apartment were out of the question

Kay: There was this assumption that you just get trained, get a job, get married. There was no talk of travelling or your own apartment!

Geraldine talked about feeling that she had no freedom as long as she lived with her parents. She lived in Dublin and stayed living with her parents until she got married.

Geraldine: My parents were the sort of parents that if I was dating a boy, they would nearly call him aside on the second date and ask him what his intentions were. I felt I had absolutely no freedom to do anything and I just couldn't wait to get away.

Of the seven women who grew up in Dublin, six lived at home until they were married. The women from the country left home for work or to go to college so their lives as young adults were different than their counterparts from Dublin. They had greater freedom to compose their own lifestyles but still within limits. They were expected to return home if they were needed and they were not

expected to get mortgages or buy their own homes. That was to happen when they married. It was okay to have a “bit of a life of your own” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) but not too much.

### **Forming Intimate Relationships**

Three of the women started going out with their prospective husbands when they were in their teens. They ended up being their first and only boyfriends. Nine of the women had courtships that lasted between one and three years. Short courtships have been found (Clarke and Berrington, 1999) to lead to an increased risk of marriage breakdown. This was not the case for the women this study. For the vast majority of the women, their courtships were a very positive period in their lives and their relationships with their husbands-to-be were the first serious relationships that they experienced. In hindsight, some of the women could see early warning signs of the difficulties that were to come but, at the time, they were enjoying the relationships and had no serious reservations about getting married. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion at that time that couples who were dating in their twenties would go on to get married. It was part of the cultural expectations and norms of the time. In the 1980s in Ireland the number of people getting married increased and the age at marriage decreased so that more young Irish people were getting married in the twenties (Kennedy, 2001).

In some of the interviews, discussions about courtship led to discussions about pre-marital sex. Irene and Kay talked about their experiences of co habiting prior to marriage and of buying contraceptives. Irene lived in London with her husband-to-be (who happened to be English) for seven years before they married.

Irene: We were able to live together because we were in London. I have a number of friends who got married when they were twenty one and they got married because they could not have a relationship in Ireland at the time. I felt free to do it, although my parents weren't aware of it. It just wasn't done. In fact, my sisters were disapproving of it.

L: Like if you came home to visit, you were talking separate bed rooms?

I: Oh, absolutely. Even when I went on holidays, I used to send postcards home with my name and “Geraldine”. His name was never on the card.

L: It was that era where our generation were very different than our parent's generation. That shift had happened. Contraception had become available and we knew about it.

I: Yes, and I was considered a little bit wild when I was young, although I wasn't wild as we know today. But I couldn't be told. I would do what I wanted to do.

L: You could do that more easily in England than you could in Ireland.

I: Absolutely.

Kay told stories about trying to buy contraceptives in the west of Ireland before she was married.

Kay: We started dating, and I don't think he every actually asked me to marry him, it was assumed we would get married!

L: Really, why?

K: Because we were both very domestic kind of people, at the time.

L: Anything to do with not having pre-marital sex?

K: No, because we did. Yea, and I got a few frights doing it, and went in with prescriptions to chemists and was literally thrown out the door like a scarlet woman! And they were legal prescriptions, and literally "we don't serve your kind here," "I remember sneaking along the quays to the family planning clinic to get a legal prescription! I was literally thrown out of two chemist shops publically! It was the most embarrassing, I couldn't believe it. I remember one particular nasty old man, he just threw it (the prescription) back and I had pick it up off the counter. "We don't serve your kind here,"

L: Because you weren't married?

K: I think it was just the whole contraceptive thing. He just didn't stock pills, full stop.

This chemist's attitude is indicative of the dominant conservative culture against artificial contraceptives that still prevailed, despite the fact that contraception had been legalised. Hill (2003) states that a practice still persisted whereby people took it upon themselves to make a judgement on whether contraceptives should be used or not. She claims that despite contraception being legalised in 1979 that

there was still ambivalence towards its use which resulted in information not being provided and contraceptives not being easily accessed by less educated and poorer sections of society.

Three of the women were pregnant getting married. Again, pre-marital pregnancy is linked in research (Clarke and Berrington, 1999) to increased risk of marriage breakdown. None of the three women felt it was a factor in their separations decades later. Jane described herself as having been “as green as the grass” when it came to knowing anything about contraception.

L: Was it usual at the time for people, for your friends, to get married around 18?

J: Not 18, I'd say I was a bit on the young side, but yea that's what was done if you were..... I was expecting getting married, you see. So the next step was you got married.

L: You were pregnant getting married. Was that a big difficulty at the time?

J: It was for me because my father came from kind of a well respected family and my mother, her attitude was “don't ever do anything to shame your father, don't ever”, so the shame of me having to tell my father, but sure, they got over that.

Nell McCafferty's view, when writing about the Kerry babies' case, was that “[w]omen are saved and elevated to the status of ladies if they become mothers within marriage” (Mc Cafferty, 2010:180). There was a clear taboo against single parenthood which made it almost impossible, culturally, financially and socially to raise a child outside marriage. It just was not done in ‘respectable’ families. Fear of pregnancy during courtship and lack of access to contraception were common themes in the interviews.

Mary: Contraception was not available, I remember in UCD they put a condom machine in the students union and the authorities took it down because it was illegal so it wasn't like you could go into a chemist and buy something so that was my biggest fear. I was terrified I would get pregnant and it would ruin my life. That was my view. So I didn't sleep

around or anything like that, so I guess in some way the social part of that did rub off on me.

Half of the women did not have sex before getting married.

L: No sex before marriage?

Lisa: No. That was the expectation and none of my friends; one girl I met in College did live with her boyfriend for a couple of months before they got married, and even I, at twenty-two, was kind of, God! You know, so there was no co-habiting at all.

L: There was no pressure,

Lisa: None at all.

L: To have sex.

Lisa: No, but then you see, we were just on the cusp of that stage, a gentleman wouldn't make advances to a lady, just nearly coming to, I'd say within two years afterwards, it all changed.

Nora described getting advice from her mother when she was going out to;

Nora: Mind herself. We were never sure what we were to mind ourselves of....You know you didn't.... A couple of week-ends I would have slept in the bed with him. But that was it. Do you know? That was it and he... how could I put it.... he understood or he.... that was the way it was.

These excerpts clearly illustrate both the continuities and the changes that were taking place in how young women lived their lives and conducted their courtships in Ireland in the late 1970s/early 1980s. Despite the introduction of the Unmarried Mother's Allowance in 1973, there was still a stigma about unmarried motherhood and uncertainty about pre-marital sex (Hill, 2003; McCafferty, 2010). Co-habitation was very rare and usually hidden. There was still an expectation that couples would marry first and have children second and that their marriages would last for life.

### **Discussion: Embeddedness and Individualisation**

In almost all respects, the families of origin of the women in this study fitted the norm for Irish families in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of their mothers were full-time housewives. Their fathers went out to work. They had a large number of brothers and sisters. Almost all attended single-sex Catholic schools and they all went to Mass on Sundays. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 on *Understanding Irish Women* (Inglis, 1998; O'Connor, 1998; Clear, 2001; Hill, 2003) shows clearly that Irish mothers at that time were expected to live their lives within the private sphere of their families. Marriage and family were seen as central to women's lives. Women were not expected to pursue individual goals. Individualisation was clearly not a key concept in how family members were expected to make choices and to live their lives. Family needs were prioritised over individual needs. Mothers were expected to practice 'self-denial' and to ensure that their children behaved according to a strict moral code. This is the type of upbringing that the women in this study described. This is the model of married woman and mother that they were brought up to emulate. The women were deeply embedded in relationships with their families. They were influenced by the familist and gender ideologies that were dominant at the time.

While there were differences in the social class backgrounds and in the locations in which the women lived, all of them were adamant that separation was unthinkable in their families when they were growing up. The quotations presented at the start of the chapter show the attitudes to separation that the women were aware of in their families, in their schools and in their churches when they were growing up. The women were aware of isolated cases of people who were separated (these were usually non-Irish or non-Catholic or living abroad) but they were embedded in the notion that separation was wrong for any members of their own families and they internalised this belief as children without even questioning it. They understood clearly that to separate would be to bring shame on themselves and on their family name. As already mentioned (Inglis, 2003), identity and status came primarily from the family a person belonged to rather than attaching to the individuals themselves. A misdemeanour, for example a separation, by one member of the family would bring shame on the

entire family and not just on the individual involved. As mentioned, individual identity was subsumed under family identity.

The women also understood as children that some people were unhappy in their marriages but the message they received from their parents was that it was not acceptable to leave an unhappy marriage. The right to individual happiness was not prioritised. The women also received the message that it was not appropriate to discuss marital separation. Silence, denial and shame surrounded the topic and the women did not think to question this view.

The women reached young adulthood between the mid 1970s and early 1980s. As mentioned already, Inglis (2003) describes the 1980s as a time when “young people were caught between remaining loyal to the Catholic vision and interpretation of life, and breaking free and creating a new meaning and identity” (p.9). Young women were caught between embeddedness in conservative beliefs about gender, sex and marriage and liberal ‘post-modern’ beliefs about the right to individual freedom and choice. It is generally acknowledged (Hill, 2003; Bacik, 2004; Ferriter, 2009) that the sexual revolution which happened in other countries in the sixties did not really come to Ireland until the eighties. The quotations on pre-marital sex in which over half the women indicated that they were afraid to use contraceptives or to engage in pre-marital sex illustrate that sex outside marriage was still not the norm in Ireland in the 1980s but that change was beginning to happen. The high profile cases described in chapter 2 (Eileen Flynn, Anne Lovett, Joanne Hayes) and the difficulties encountered by the Government in passing contraception and divorce legislation, show the type of conservative attitudes that were still dominant in Ireland at this time. Yet, some liberal views were beginning to be voiced. The second wave of the women’s movement in the 1970s in Ireland had shifted many of the taken-for-granted essentialist notions about women’s positions and had highlighted problems that existed in family life (O’Connor, 1998; Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2004; Connolly and O’Toole, 2005).

The quotations of the women reflect evidence of increasing individualisation in how some of the women were able to ‘compose their lives’ (Bateson, 1989) once

they left home. The quotations reflect the growing levels of freedom to develop individual identities that some of the women displayed during their young adulthood. They show that life chances and choices were no longer so fully determined by family status (Beck, 1992). These women had availed of free secondary schooling and some of them were the first members of their families to get a third-level education. Several of the women followed individual agendas and left Ireland in search of freedom and adventure. Some of them engaged in pre-marital sex and used artificial methods of contraception. They could have ‘a bit of a life of their own’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:55). However, the women remained connected to their families of origin and all of them eventually returned to settle, that is to marry and to raise children, in Ireland. Marriage based on love or a ‘pure relationship’ (Giddens, 1992) was still seen as the ‘ideal’ situation for a woman and the women did not question that ideal.

The quotations also show the women’s ability to negotiate with the rules of the society and to ‘pick and mix’ between the traditional Catholic practices they had grown up with and the more liberal modern options they were exposed to as young adults. For example, by buying contraceptives in a town in which they were not known (Kay) or by co-habiting in England where they could not be seen by parents or by disapproving older siblings (Irene), they were breaking the rule on pre-marital sex but in a manner that would not subject them to censure. They appeared to be overtly staying within the rules of society and at the same time they managed to have a degree of individual freedom.

What all of the women share is that they lived on the cusp of significant changes in Ireland in terms of lifestyles and attitudes to a woman’s place in the family and in society. The women’s views on marriage and separation were influenced during their formative years by their parents and their priests and nuns, yet they went on to live in an Ireland in which unmarried parenthood, contraception, cohabitation and divorce became commonplace (Lunn *et al.*, 2009). They began to change some of their views during their young adulthood years, yet none of them openly engaged in pre-marital sex by living in Ireland with their husbands-to-be. They remained embedded in fears about unmarried pregnancy and concerns about bringing shame on their families. They retained some aspects of

their parents' belief systems and changed others. They showed embeddedness in family beliefs and relationships, at the same time as showing individual agency in beginning to break with those beliefs and practices. They remained connected to family, but in a manner that did not entirely limit their ability to bend some family rules in search of individual happiness. This is the background against which these women made sense of their subsequent separations.

### **Experiences during Marriage**

This section deals with the accounts given by the fourteen women about their marriages. Data and discussion on the women's experiences of raising children, their satisfaction with the division of household tasks, the impact of work and money difficulties on their relationships, the quality of communication with their spouses, the nature of sexual relations, methods of resolving conflict and turning points in their marital relationships are all presented. The concept which underpins much of the discussion in this section is the concept of love labour (Lynch, 2007). Love labour involves putting the work into the 'doing' of love.

As mentioned, love labour has physical, mental and cognitive components, as well as an emotional component (Lynch, 2007). It involves doing, thinking and feeling. It refers to interactions between people who care about/love each other and the patterns of behaviour and thinking which develop as a result of that interaction

**Table 3: Profile of Women during Marriage**

#### **Relationships during Marriage**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Length of Courtship</b>	<b>Year Married</b>	<b>Age at Marriage</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Woman's Occupation (Previous)</b>	<b>Year of Separation</b>
<b>Anne</b>	30 months	1987	29 (f) 31 (m)	1990 1992	Professional	2008
<b>Breda</b>	18 months	1978	20 21	1978 1983	Carer for Daughter (Housewife)	2003
<b>Catherine</b>	5 years	1974	20 23	1978 1980 1984	Professional	2009
<b>Deidre</b>	30 months	1978	23 30	1983 1987	Professional	2005

<b>Name</b>	<b>Length of Courtship</b>	<b>Year Married</b>	<b>Age at Marriage</b>	<b>Children</b>	<b>Woman's Occupation (Previous)</b>	<b>Year of Separation</b>
<b>Eileen</b>	20 months	1983	29 28	1983 1984 1987	Professional	2009
<b>Frances</b>	30 months	1982	25 31	1984 1985 1987	Professional	2005
<b>Geraldine</b>	20 months	1985	24 24	1988 1992 1994	Clerical	2005
<b>Helen</b>	6 years	1984	23 24	1986 1990 1992	p/t Clerical (Housewife)	2006
<b>Irene</b>	7 years	1982	27 25	1985 1988 1990	Professional	2008
<b>Jane</b>	18 months	1982	18 18	1982 1984 1988	p/t shop Assistant (Housewife)	2008
<b>Kay</b>	12 months	1982	21 23	1984 1987	Professional	2004
<b>Lisa</b>	3 years	1981	28 31	1983 1986 1988	Professional	2006
<b>Mary</b>	5 years	1986	25 26	1995	Former business exec. returning to education	2008
<b>Nora</b>	2 years	1980	23 24	1982 1987	p/t shop Assistant (Housewife)	2009

### **Profile of Women during Marriage**

Table 3 shows that the women's courtships typically lasted between two and three years, the shortest being twelve months and the longest being seven years (for the couple who were living together abroad). Marriages took place between 1978 and 1987. The women were mostly in their mid-twenties when they got married. Thirteen of the fourteen women had Church weddings. The only exception was a woman who got married in a registry office in the U.S. All of the women went on to have children. Just one woman had a single child. Eight of the fourteen women had three children. The remaining five women had two children. As mentioned in the previous section, three of the women were pregnant getting married. Two were in their teens when they got pregnant. The third woman was

in her late twenties. These profiles mirror the patterns of family formation that were common in Ireland in the 1980s in terms of the age at marriage and the size of families (Fahey and Field, 2008).

The women's occupations also mirrored the type of occupations in which women in Ireland were (and still are) typically employed (Hill, 2003). Those with third-level education worked in education and health. Those with second-level education worked in clerical or secretarial positions. Those who had less education leaving school tended to work part-time in shops or in the service sector. In the table, it was not possible to capture the variety of full and part-time jobs that the women held during their marriages. The insertion of housewife in brackets indicates that for much of these four women's married lives their principal occupation was as full-time housewives. It was also not possible to show how many of them had gone on to get degrees during the course of their marriages or during their separations. By the time the interviews were conducted in the summer of 2010, thirteen of the fourteen women had obtained Degree and Masters (2) level qualifications.

The proportion of this group of women who are employed as professionals and who have third-level qualifications marks them out as being a predominantly middle class group of women. That most of the women were in employment also makes them different to a substantial minority of women in Ireland. Recent statistics show that the rate for female employment was 56.4% in 2010 (CSO, 2011). Previous studies (Lunn *et al.*, 2009; Moore, 2010) have shown that single and separated women have a higher employment rate than married women also that female graduates in their 50s have a higher rate of separation than non-graduates. These topics will be discussed later.

### **Transition to Parenthood**

Becoming parents for the first time has been identified by Carter and McGoldrick (2005) as the most difficult transition in the family life cycle. It involves what Bateson (1989) terms "an entire restructuring of life around commitments to others" (p.75). It involves doing love labour in the sense described on pages 80 and 81. Lunn *et al.* (2009), in their analysis of Census trends in Ireland between

1986 and 2006, identified that the risk of marital breakdown increased by 25 to 30 percent for couples with one child compared to those with no children or those with two children. Their “favoured explanation is that a first child can put a strain on a relationship, while having more children is a sign that any strains have been overcome” (p.x). Analysis of the data for this study would echo the sentiment that a first child can put a strain on a relationship but would not support the view that having a second child indicates that relationship issues have been overcome, as will become clear from the discussion that follows.

More than half of the women described how difficult life was when their first child entered their lives. Three of them (Anne, Geraldine and Mary) traced the beginnings of the subsequent problems in their marriages back to the trouble they experienced in becoming parents for the first time.

One woman, Mary, who had a child after nine years of marriage, clearly linked the difficulties in her marriage to how she and her husband coped with having their daughter. They were living abroad and had no family support. As they were both working in full-time, pressurised jobs, they took turns at getting up at night with the child. Mary described the birth of her daughter as;

A shock. She [her infant daughter] would wake up six times a night. Three years of sleep deprivation took its toll. We never got back on an even keel.

Geraldine also described the birth of her first child as a shock and how she too was unable to cope with sleepless nights at the same time as holding down a full-time job.

Geraldine: In particular, the first one, he was born out of love and it was such a shock to my system, the responsibility of it. I think I must have had a bit of post natal depression but I didn't see that. I didn't tell anybody, even the nurse that came in and I was breast feeding and I couldn't feed the child. He was only starving, the poor child. I just found it very stressful and I couldn't bring myself to getting up during the night

and he ended up having to do that. He couldn't handle my emotional distress at all. He didn't know what to do with it but the way he handled it was he looked after the child. He was the one that walked the boards at night. I couldn't hack it. He has always held that against me.

The expectation in the above extract seems to be that it was the norm for a woman to be able to cope with a new baby and that a woman who could not cope had to hide her distress and felt, in some way, judged as being deficient or not measuring up to how an ideal mother was supposed to behave. Rather than feeling supported by her husband taking on the night shift with a crying baby, Geraldine felt judged and found wanting. This couple went on to have two more children. The second child was a "dream baby". The third child was not sick but "he didn't sleep for two and a half years". The husband "absented himself from night duty from the second child on, just like that." Again it would appear that there was no discussion between the couple about who was going to care for the second baby. For the birth of the third child "he sat in the corner doing the crossword and keeping an eye on the game whereas the first time he was there holding my hand and they had to tell him to get out of the way" (Geraldine).

That Geraldine did not feel she could admit to being so stressed and unable to cope with her new baby, and that she and her husband were unable to communicate about her distress may be indicative of her fearing that she was failing in a task which society presents as always being a 'happy event'. Carter and McGoldrick (2005) suggest that while the transition to parenthood can be the most difficult transition in the life course, it is often idealised by society. Bateson (2000) talks about societies in which there are no expectations that a woman would be able to mind her first or possibly, second or third child, on her own. She describes practices where the first time mother's mother and sisters would be on hand to take care of the child for a number of years and questions the expectations in Western society that couples (mothers, in particular) should be able to cope alone, at the same time as being expected to hold down full time jobs.

Not feeling connected, not being able to communicate about emotionally difficult topics and not feeling supported at times of need (Geraldine) are examples of the type of disconnection in relationships that emerged as recurring themes throughout the interviews. At the time the mothers in this study were describing, maternity leave consisted of fourteen weeks with pay and four weeks without pay. The experiences described above raise questions about the adequacy of the state support provided at that time for families with new babies in Ireland. If support from extended family was not available, usually in the form of a mother or a sister, then it appears that new parents were expected to cope on their own.

Other women told very different stories about how they and their husbands coped with childbirth, illness and sleepless nights. They described love labour being done in a variety of ways. When describing the birth of her first son, Irene said;

He [her husband] came to the birth and was really, really supportive. I was sick, really, because I got septicaemia in labour but he was great, he really was.

Her husband was equally involved in the birth of the second child and he actually helped to deliver the third child when she arrived unexpectedly at home. Irene's babies were not easy to mind or healthy all the time. The first child was "forever sick" and the second child was described as "a tear away" but these were not described as issues that lead to difficulties in the couple's relationship.

There was a sense, for some of the mothers (Nora, Lisa, Irene, Catherine) that raising the children was a joint project in which both parents shared and in which they supported each other. They shared the job of caring for and raising their children. The transition to parenthood was experienced as a transition that could be tackled together. Other mothers and fathers adopted more traditionally gendered roles, with the mothers (Breda, Jane, Helen) doing the majority of the childcare and the fathers going out to work. This was not a problem where the women also held traditional views on their roles. This, however, was not always the case. Some of the mothers (Mary, Geraldine, Kay) tracked the subsequent difficulties in their marriages to problems between themselves and their husbands about managing childcare tasks. They blamed the stress of juggling a job and a baby, as well as the fact that they were receiving insufficient support from their

husbands, or from other sources. Traditional expectations of what a mother's role was and what a father's role was still seemed to be in play, even though the women were employed outside the home.

The experiences described above about how couples coped with child bearing and child rearing show significant differences between the couples. Some parents coped very well with sleepless nights and sick children and did the work involved in love labour. Others found that the stress involved put a strain on their relationships. Not feeling supported by their partners, not being able to talk honestly about their concerns, not having their worries taken on board and not feeling that love labour was being appropriately done emerged as common themes in the deterioration of relationships as the interviews progressed. This is similar to findings by O'Connor (2001) and McKeown *et al.* (2004) in their studies of couples who attended for marriage counselling, in that it was the affective and relational aspects of relationships which people had the most difficulty with rather than the practical aspects.

### **Satisfaction with the Division of Household Tasks**

The division of household tasks was very closely linked in the women's stories to discussions about the tasks involved in caring for children. Nine of the fourteen women worked in full-time employment throughout their married lives. As mentioned, twelve of the fourteen women had described their own mothers as full-time housewives so seven of these nine women were the first generation of mothers in their families to have worked full-time outside the home. The other five women spent periods at home full-time, interspersed with working in part-time positions which fitted in around their children school times.

Jane: It fitted and I was always here then, it finished at 12 o'clock and I was home, and you know I was in the yard, where they were, I was in the school where they were going to school and if ever there was a problem I was there, you know.

Recent research carried out in the U.K. (Sigle-Rushton, 2010) found that divorce rates were lower in families where husbands helped with housework, shopping

and childcare. “A study of 3,500 British married couples after the birth of their first child found that the more the men helped, the lower the incidence of divorce”. The link is not that clear in the data for this study. Several of the husbands did their share of cooking and cleaning. The crucial factor seems to be whether both parties were happy about how household tasks were shared and whether they felt loved rather than whether they actually did equal shares of the work (McKeown, *et al.*, 2004).

Eileen: He always tidied up and would have done house work. If he came in the door at six o'clock, having been gone to work for ten hours, and I was feeding a child, he just went ahead and got the dinner and then went out and did his farming. You never had to ask him to do anything. If he saw clothes, he would put them in the washing machine and then when the washing machine was finished, he would hang them out.

Nora: He was great with the children. Whoever was home first cooked the dinner. He mightn't have been the greatest at hoovering or tidying up, but he'd put on or he'd hang out a wash. He'd tidy, he'd wash the dishes. He never expected his dinner on the table when he came home. As I said, whoever was home first would do the dinner. If I was working late he'd cook the dinner, so he did help out around the house.

Where couples had a very traditional division of tasks, it did not seem to be an issue for some of the women that their husbands did so little housework during the course of their marriages. Breen and Cooke (2005) found that 23% of Irish married females and 31% of Irish married males could be classified as 'traditional' types.

Jane I did everything! Presents, birthdays everything, his clothes, everything. Communion, confirmations, Christmas...He wouldn't know what Santa would be after bringing them until we would be putting them together that night. He supplied the money, end of story. He'd come home and he'd do the garden, or he'd wash the cars. No, like I really

thought we had the balance right. I was as happy as Larry in my own home, with the three girls.

Both Helen and Jane stated that they wanted to be at home full-time with their children. They found it less stressful than trying to juggle work, childcare and running a home

Helen: I didn't want to stay on at work. Because he considered his job to be more important than my job, he wouldn't be willing to take time off if they were sick or anything like that. When the eldest girl was small and I was at work, if anything came up, it was always me that had to take time off. I could see the pattern. I couldn't cope with that kind of stress and I wanted to be at home.

It is only looking back, after having discovered infidelity, in particular, that many of the women were angry and resentful at the amount of work they did that was unseen and taken for granted. Both Helen and Jane stated that they thoroughly enjoyed being at home full-time with their children and that it is only now, following separation, that they realise how vulnerable not having an income and a career outside the home has left them.

However, there were also accounts in which women were seriously upset by how little housework their husbands did and where they made a clear connection between their resentment over being left to do all the work and the deterioration of their relationships. The meaning (Lupton, 1998) the women attached to their husband's behaviour ("if he loved me, he would help me") in not sharing the household tasks was what caused the trouble and this meaning was not communicated to the men in a manner which led to a change in their behaviour. McKeown *et al.* (2004) would describe this type of encounter as an example of a demand-withdrawal dynamic, whereby the woman asks for/ 'nags'/demands help, the man hears her request as criticism and instead of changing his behaviour, he withdraws, which she then reads as further evidence that he does not love her and she withdraws. Withdrawal involves not doing the work needed

to do love labour effectively. Examples of this pattern of interaction will be shown over and over in the quotations that follow.

Kay: He would be gone, as I said he was involved with a club. I had just had the first baby and I was sitting here at home, trying to get everything done and he might not arrive home until 10 or 11 at night. I remember one time when my daughter was taken in for tonsillitis and he was left at home with my son and he did nothing all weekend, and when I came home Monday and had been told not to leave the house with my daughter for two days, and discovered there wasn't even milk in the house. It hadn't occurred to him, and I just couldn't get it across to him. I found that really odd even at the time. He just didn't see that he had the time to do these things, even though I could see he had just watched sport or whatever. He always had the idea that he would help but it was always 'help', it wasn't his responsibility. That irritated me more and more as time went on.

Breda has a child with special needs and found the fact that her husband was "very traditional" and that she was getting "no hands-on help" to be a significant factor in her decision to separate.

Breda: It's not so much what was said or done, but what all that was unsaid and undone. "If you're not happy, you know where the door is". He actually said that to me. I just wanted him to meet me half way. Instead of saying how really angry that made me, I just choked.

There are elements of patriarchal thinking coming through in some of the quotations. Helen's statement that her husband always considered his job as being more important than hers is one example. Kay's perception that her husband felt that childcare and domestic tasks were her responsibility with which he would occasionally help her is another example of traditional gender role thinking. These are just two examples amongst many the women gave of how embedded they felt their husbands were in traditional expectations of what constituted women's work.

There were also stories about men who had helped out with housework initially but who stopped as the years passed. Deidre said that “as the children got that bit older, he wasn’t doing his share of work in the house”. In some cases, the connectedness which had been present at the start of marriages weakened overtime and the division of household tasks and childcare became more traditional. This is a common trend found in research (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005), that many marriages become more traditional during the child rearing years.

### **Financial Problems**

From a traditional perspective, a man going out to work was construed as the man showing he loved his wife and children. It does not appear from the data below that the opposite would be the case, in other words, that a man who did not go out to work would be seen as not showing love or doing love labour. However, in seven out of the fourteen cases, the women linked their separations to problems relating to the men’s work or lack of work. In the following case the man had frequent job changes or periods of unemployment and he could not seem to get settled in one job.

Helen: He kept changing jobs and moving around. If he didn’t like the way stuff was going in a job, he would just leave it and get somewhere else. I wasn’t happy about that because of continuity and all of that. He would never discuss it. That was his thing. It was part of him and it had nothing to do with me.

As in the earlier discussions about the sharing of childcare and household tasks, it was not the problems in work *per se* that caused the problems in the marriage but how the couples communicated or failed to communicate, how they did love labour that was the issue. Three of the men set up their own businesses which failed, resulting in them amassing debts. Financial insecurity was an issue in these instances. Rows over money became a feature of relationships. The women got tired of paying all the bills and feeling like the responsible ones in the relationships, while their husbands took no responsibility.

Frances: He brought an unfair dismissals case against the XXXX which meant that he was off. I can't remember how long.

L: How upset was he through that whole process?

E: Well you see this is it. He never actually verbalised that to me. Then he started up his own business and it just didn't work out.

L: Were you in debt?

E: Oh, huge, huge and that's when I became very terrified about how I would spend my life. There were bills coming in the door. Everything was in chaos, bills-wise.

Irene's husband was self employed and she was a nurse. She described how;

Irene: He never earned over ten thousand euro a year. I probably was earning sixty thousand a year, but it was all committed, I paid health insurance, I paid the mortgage, I paid life insurance, there were so many commitments, but it was all very much for our future together.

At no point was she considering separating from her husband just because he did not have a steady income. She stated that she "loved the guy" and just wanted him to be a bit more responsible. She described the day she finally insisted that he pay some of the bills;

Irene: There was a time I went away on a three week holiday with my sisters a few years back and when I got back, they had had a fantastic time, him and the kids and he had done some work and got paid for some of the work, but when I got back the bills were on the table waiting for me, so I thought 'This is crazy, I'm not taking this any more.' So I said to him 'there may be bills the table, but from this day forward they are your bills, I am not paying for everything'. Things started to go pear shaped at that stage.

In the seven cases where financial insecurity was a problem and where men were having trouble in work, many of the men were unable to discuss their problems

with their wives. Several of the wives seem to have been supportive of whatever decisions their husbands made about their careers, but a pattern of regular job changes and failed business ventures took their toll on family finances and on relationships. There seems to have been a sense whereby the women felt that the men were leaving all the responsibility for managing the family finances to them. They saw it as another example of the men not helping them, not sharing the work of managing the family and not doing the love labour required. They felt over-burdened, unsupported and unloved.

### **Sexual Relations**

McDonnell (1999) identified sexual problems within a marriage as ‘barometer issues’ which signified deeper problems in marriages. The women in the study seemed to agree with this interpretation of sexual problems as a symptom rather than as a cause of relationship difficulties. Initially, practical reasons were given for not having sex, for example, that the man was working nights or because the man snored so much or because the man had become so obese.

L: When you started to sleep in separate bedrooms, was that your choice or his choice or did you think, now we are really in trouble?

Anne: No, that was going on a long time because he had very erratic habits. He would never kind of go to bed at eleven and get up at eight. He didn’t have that type of a lifestyle. He worked shift hours and he would stay up late at night. I’d be up in the morning and had to be going with the children. So that was how that started.

L: Very different sleeping patterns. There was no real intimacy, closeness?

Anne: No. There wasn’t for a long time .

L: Sometimes when resentment builds up one of the things that happens is that there is no sex. Did he ever come back into the bedroom after he had left when your second baby was born?

Deidre: Yes he did but I was the one who left the bedroom. I left the bedroom very gradually and initially it was because of snoring.

L: Was it [you heading off to the spare room] something you could talk about to your husband?

Deidre: Not really. It was to do with his snoring. I tried to see would he do something about that. It came up again during the counselling. It's very hard to separate what was causing what. It's a whole combination.

L: Do you mind me asking, were you still having sex at that stage? Were you still sharing a bed?

Irene: Yes, we were. I think I had given him the cold shoulder many times because I'll tell you what happened. G got very obese, put on an awful lot of weight. I was worried about his blood pressure because it was sky high. He had sleep apnea. He had insomnia and I was sleeping beside this guy who I could hear stopping breathing. He was terrible at snoring because he was so fat. So really I wasn't a happy camper with this person. This was not the person I had lived a lot of my life with. This guy was turning into a beast.

Not having sex started gradually and for, seemingly, practical reasons. It then became the norm in the couples' marriages, without any discussion taking place about what was happening or how each partner felt about not having sex.

Deidre and Helen described the shame they would have felt if anyone knew they were not having sex and that they continued to share a bed in order to keep up appearances in front of the children or if their family members were visiting.

Deidre: There was nearly a stigma attached, I thought if anyone knew that we didn't stay in the same room, that it was scandalous. If my mother ever came down to stay, I was in that bedroom with him regardless of what went on every other night.

The common scenario described was that sexual relations had ceased as a consequence of the deterioration in communication and disengaging that had been taking place over several years. Emotional distancing had been taking place so, to the women, it made sense that physical distancing was also taking place.

They were not feeling loved so they were not showing love. This was not the case for all the women. Some of them were having sex with their husbands right up to the time of their separations.

L. Did you head for separate bedrooms?

Kay: Oh no, and that would never have happened, never. And sex wouldn't have been wonderful all the time, but, no that would never have happened.

L: No, you would never have done that, or suggested or felt,

Kay: No never, never. No, he was my husband. And you know for twenty years it had been a very, very satisfying relationship.

Lisa, on the other hand, felt that sexual problems had been a primary cause in the breakdown of the marriage.

Lisa: I again, was trying to keep the sex life going, and he just one day said, "for God's sake L, this has to stop," he said, "we're too old," he said "I'm fifty," and I said, "K I'm only forty-seven, I don't feel I'm too old," and he said "well I just feel that we're too old," and I remember I just turned and I said, "ok, that is that, that's the nail in the coffin, I am never going to put myself out there again.

The rejection Lisa felt and her sense of not being loved are recurring themes in many of the quotations. As with almost every theme in this discussion, there are differences in the sexual relationships described by the women. Some were still having sex almost right up to the time they separated. Others were still sleeping in the same beds but not having sex. Others had long since moved to separate bedrooms. Three of the women alluded to the possibility that their husbands might have been gay. Another woman's husband disclosed, twenty years into their marriage, that he had been abused as a child. The common denominator in all cases was that the couples were unable or unwilling to discuss these matters. Many of the wives felt that their husbands did not have the words or had never acquired the skills to discuss emotional issues. A gulf in understanding and an

inability to truly connect with each other emerged as a result of failing to deal with a very difficult issue.

### **Approaches to Resolving Conflict**

How couples resolve conflict has been found to be a key factor in the success or failure of many marriages (McKeown *et al.*, 2004). Again the issue of how girls and boys are socialised to deal with conflict is relevant. Some of the women felt that they had been brought up to be quiet and submissive. Messages internalised from childhood about the importance of self-denial for women and about 'not being worthy' (Inglis, 1998) may have had a bearing. The women felt that if they confronted matters that were bothering them, they were accused of "rocking the boat". As mentioned, many of them felt their husbands did not have the ability to discuss emotionally difficult topics. Therefore, the women felt they were being pressurised to be silent and not to cause rows. Many of the women blamed themselves for not being more assertive. They felt nothing worked to bring about change. Fighting did not work. Silence did not work. They were unable to find a method that worked.

Anne, Frances and Geraldine were not the passive type. They described how they used to 'lose their cool' or 'stand their ground';

Anne: If I lost my cool and gave out in a row, I was losing it. I wasn't allowed to bang a door. Calm down there. You're the one that's losing their cool here. You're out of order.

Frances: I used to get really angry. I used to blow at him. I would be the type of person that I would get quite excitable, about good things and bad things, in equal measure. I would react and so I used to get really annoyed.

Geraldine: There was a bit of arguing but mostly the silent treatment. He never shared what he wanted to say or what his feelings were. There were rows, big rows as well and that's what upset the kids because I always stood my ground. But he knew that if he riled me that I would react that way so it was this vicious circle, big fights, loud shouting rows coming

towards the end. That way the kids were witnessing the fights. It was awful, it was awful. That went on for years.

Deidre, Eileen and Lisa described how silence and withdrawal were the methods of conflict resolution used in their houses.

Deidre: Here at home, when I was annoyed with him, It's probably one of the worst ways to deal with it, but silence was my answer for it. Silence would build up for long periods of time. If there was a row or a disagreement over something, he would carry a silence on for days, whereas I would be inclined to go silent too, but it would go out of my system more quickly. I would find myself often pussy footing around him saying "I'd better be careful what I say around him, I'd better not ask him to cut the grass, because he wont do it and that will cause a row and then there'll be a long silence.

Eileen: If I disagreed, he just disappeared so there was no communication. I wasn't heard. If I disagreed, he disappeared and came back and said nothing. I just shut down. If I disagreed or said anything emotional, he withdrew. He didn't want to know about it.

Lisa: So you learn not to rock the boat. And because that was a bit my personality anyway, don't rock the boat, it was familiar territory. So you just hide it and you get on with it, and you cry a little bit at night, the little tears come out, but you get on with it because you have the girls and you can't...

The methods of conflict resolution described are similar to those described in literature on typical methods people engage in when trying to resolve conflict in relationships (McKeown *et al.*, 2003), except that there is no mention of any physical violence. Putting the time and effort into sorting out conflict is a key aspect of love labour (Lynch, 2007). It requires people to be honest and assertive, at the same time as being empathic. It requires (McKeown, *et al.*, 2003) people to take a problem solving approach to what is a joint problem. Using violence and

aggression are the least effective and most damaging methods of resolving conflict (McKeown, *et al.*, 2003). Silence and withdrawal avoid the worst excesses of the aggressive approach but, as these women have described, the silent approach may eventually lead to a gradual distancing or fragmenting of the relationship. Silence and withdrawal can be interpreted as rejection and as not caring enough or not having the skills to do the love labour required to talk through the issues that lead to the conflict in the first place.

### **Quality of Couple Relationship**

Some of the women described relationships which were very good for several years. They described being “best pals” (Catherine) with their husbands and how, for most of their married lives, they had never considered that they might separate. They described how supportive their husbands were when they went back to study (Irene) and when they were sick (Nora).

Irene: I was hoping that I'd bury him. I'd be there to put the sod over him or maybe he would do it for me. I did not think for one moment that this (separation) would happen. When I was doing my own Masters he was fantastic support and that's not that many years ago, I felt great support, I felt he gave me lots of time, he was fantastic with the kids in lots of ways, he was fun and it just got to the stage where he was fun and I was not because I was tired and strained but I always thought that as a unit we would survive.

Nora: We got on well. We always spoke about everything, you know. I couldn't say anything. He was a very easy person to get on with. In 2007, I got cervical cancer and he was very good to me. The girls said he cried when I was in having surgery. And he didn't know what to do and what if anything happened me and all of this.

These quotations are good examples of love labour being done in a manner which built connectedness and made the women feel loved.

Jane described how shocked their family and friends were when they separated because they were seen as being a very united couple.

Jane: When our marriage broke up we were the shock of the century, we were THE shock. We were the Waltons one second, if you know, we did everything together, the lads were big into sport, we travelled everywhere with them. We did everything as a family, you know.

As the above quotations show, Jane, Nora, Irene and Catherine felt they had good relationships with their husbands. They felt connected to them over many years of marriage and did not think that they would end up separated. On balance, they felt that their marriages were good. As will be outlined in the next chapter, the separations in these cases came about as a result of infidelity by their husbands and came as a shock to the women.

However, some marriages were described as having been in difficulty for years. The themes that emerged from these descriptions had to do with the women not feeling emotionally close to their husbands, not feeling loved, but not feeling that they could either 'mend or end' their marriages (McKeown *et al.*, 2004) and so continuing to live in very unhappy situations for several years.

Deidre: I mean it was just a gradual, bit by bit, deterioration. He started going out a lot on his own. When I attempted to find out where was he going, why was he going out, I got answers like "you don't seem to really care about me so you don't need to know these things and its nothing to do with you really.

Lisa: I ended up crying a lot and not knowing why I was crying, and really deep inside me I knew the kernel was the relationship was not great and I was afraid to voice that, put words on that because I would have to do something about it or face it, and I knew I couldn't. Because it wasn't bad enough, there was no reason, he wasn't being unfaithful, I wasn't being unfaithful. There was no physical abuse or that. But there was slowly starting this emotional distancing. So gradually over the next few

years, I started disengaging. He disengaged first emotionally. I started protecting myself, putting up the wall.

Mary: I think we stopped probably really talking to each other in a way about what we felt. I think it's about acknowledging each other's feelings and being able to say what you're feeling. It got to the point where we kind of stopped talking to each other. I think that was the biggest factor. I think that probably was the biggest thing. The communication just breaks down somehow and then the trust goes as well because then the communication is often only angry or negative communication, name calling and that kind of stuff.

Deidre, Lisa and Mary are describing a gradual disconnecting in their relationships with their husbands. In hindsight, they could see that there were problems for several years, but the prospect of separation was so awful and so alien to the ideology about marriage that they had grown up with that they could not even voice the problem, not to mind suggest separation as a solution.

The emphasis on relational issues, on love labour not being done, is a common theme in the literature on the causes women, in particular, are found to identify as the reasons for their divorces (Amato and Previti, 2003). Women were more likely than men to refer to emotional or relational issues. Not feeling emotionally close to their partners and not feeling that emotions were reciprocated emerged as common themes in several of the studies reviewed (McDonnell, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; O'Connor, 2001; Amato and Previti, 2003; McKeown *et al.*, 2004).

### **Significant Events (Holidays, Illness, Death) -Turning Points**

The events that the women described as being significant in their eventual separations were events that occurred during family holidays, events at the time of illness in the family and events that occurred around the times of their parents' or siblings' deaths. The common theme in all the stories that were told about these events was how unloved the women felt as a result of how their husbands

behaved at those times. Lack of closeness in marital relationships was felt especially on holidays and during family celebratory events (Gillis, 1996). It would appear that the change from busy daily schedules showed up relationships' difficulties in a clearer light. On holidays, if glossy brochures are to be believed, the expectation is that couples have a good time together, enjoy each other's company, have sex, enjoy seeing new things and meeting new people, away from the stresses and strains of work. If the opposite happens, then it is even more obvious that a relationship is in trouble than may be apparent in the course of a normal weekly routine, as Geraldine described:

Geraldine: Now the first time I really, finally saw that there was a problem was in '97. I remember the year because we were away on holiday. We took the ferry to England. On the way down to get the boat in Roslare a bus sliced a chunk out of our car and didn't stop, just kept going. It was half seven in the morning and we were trying to get the boat. That was the start of the beginning of the end. There were rows for the whole time and I tried not to get annoyed but then on the boat on the way home, the second fella fell out of one of the bunks and slit his head open and we had to get that treated on the boat. It was just things like that. It was that kind of a holiday, a lot of tension, little small accidents happening and just one massive row.

L: Had you been taking family holidays together?

Helen: Yes, the last one we took was that June and it was the biggest nightmare. It was hell on earth. We were going to France. We decided, as part of our holiday, we'd take in Paris for four or five days and I asked my parents to come with us. Communication was still kind of going on between us at this stage but he was a mentaller. I was trying to hide everything from everybody. He really was so rude to my parents. And then my parents went home and we went up into Brittany and we were in a very remote place and I hadn't got insured in the car, he was just desperate. I thought I would never get home. He hardly spoke to us. I was trying to keep the whole thing going with just two of the girls.

Helen was clearly still trying to present the image of being a happy family to her parents and to her children. Keeping up appearances and not confronting the 'elephant in the room', that her husband barely spoke to his wife and children and was rude to her parents, were not confronted.

Lack of emotional closeness and support, love labour, was felt more acutely at times when the women, their children or their parents were ill as Deidre describes:

Deidre: I suffered the greatest pain that I never, ever want to go back there again. I just couldn't get up off the floor. I went into the bathroom and I said to him "oh I hurt my back". Every bit of blood drained out of me. I went into the bathroom and I got sick with the pain. He turned over in the bed and he said "oh you better get back into bed". Now that was one of the coldest, cruellest things I can ever remember. At that stage, things weren't very bad but that stuck with me. He didn't even sit up in the bed to see was I sitting or standing or lying. I thought I was going to faint and I never fainted in my life and he said "well, you'd better get back into bed".

Lack of emotional closeness and support was also felt more acutely at times of bereavements. If love labour was not felt at times of loss, its absence was even more apparent than that experienced in the normal course of daily living. Carter and McGoldrick (2005) identify that coming to terms with the deaths of parents or, less commonly, with the death of siblings is one of the key tasks for people during midlife.

Eileen: The emotional support was never there. One of the things that keeps coming into my mind was the time my brother died and when I walked in the door, all I wanted was a hug and he just walked away. My brother had just died but no.

A number of the women linked the timing of their separations to the deaths of either their own parents or their husbands' parents. Lisa was able to afford to

leave her husband because she had inherited money following her parents' deaths.

Helen: His mother died in 2005. It was 2006 when we separated. Somebody said something about what would his mother have thought and the way he was treating the children. He said "I wouldn't have done it while she was still alive". It was more or less he waited 'til she died.

A key aspect of the interviews was how often the women told stories about specific events in order to illustrate aspects of their relationship difficulties. Rather than talking in generalities, they linked processes to specific incidents and practices. This has resulted in data which does not "flatten out" lives but which is rich in detail (Smart, 2007). The women were not asked specifically about holidays or bereavements but they used stories about these events to illustrate particular turning points in their marriages.

### **Discussion: Problems with Love Labour in Marriage**

In the literature reviewed on the processes leading to separation, changing attitudes and opportunities in societies, for example, individualisation and greater economic independence for women were identified as some of the factors contributing to the increased rate of marital separation (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Dronkers *et al.*, 2006). Problems within the couple relationship, for example, a mismatch of expectations, poor communication skills and poor conflict resolution skills were also identified (Amato, 2000; O'Connor, 2001; McKeown *et al.*, 2003). As mentioned at the start of this section, the lens through which these areas will be examined in this section will be the lens of love labour. Reference will also be made to evidence of embeddedness in traditional gender role expectations.

The meaning of love changes as societies change. As discussed in Chapter 2 on *Understanding Irish Women*, love was not always the basis for marriage in Ireland. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s economic considerations, often to do with property and land, rather than romantic love, were considered to be most important. Men and women lived in very separate worlds. Men went out to work.

Women stayed at home to mind the children. The traditional male breadwinner model was the norm (O'Connor, 1998). From the 1960s onwards, relationships based on love began to be seen as essential for marriage. Other changes which effected relationships within marriage included the availability of contraceptives, which resulted in smaller families and the fact that more married women were going out to work. As shown in Table 3, the women in this study got married between 1978 and 1987 and nine of the fourteen women worked full-time throughout their marriages.

There is evidence in the quotations to suggest that most of the women expected their husbands to share the childcare and housework, in other words, to do love labour by helping with the children and helping around the house. For many of the men, this was not a problem. As the quotations from Eileen and Nora show, these men did not expect their wives to do all the housework and childcare and were happy to share the work equally. Where this was the case, the transition to parenting and the division of household tasks were not the issues which led to eventual separation.

Other couples (Jane and Helen) adopted very traditional roles in relation to childcare and the division of household tasks. The women were happy to care for the children and to do all the housework. The men went to work and took care of the garden, the car and the house maintenance. These couples were embedded in traditional gender roles, but there was not a problem.

In some dual-earning couples (Geraldine and Mary), it was not that the men did not share in the childcare but that, as a consequence of both parents caring for the child as well as holding down a job, they did not have the time or the energy to put the work into caring for each other. They did not do the love labour for each other and became disconnected along the way.

However, for other couples (Kay and Breda) there was a clear mismatch in expectations about responsibility for childcare and housework. Breda mentioned that the key factor in her decision to separate was that her husband would not “meet her half way” in helping to care for her daughter who has special needs.

He did not share the work of caring for their daughter and his wife saw this as a sign, not only that he did not love his daughter sufficiently but also, that he did not love her. In these cases, it was not just the mismatch in expectations about the doing of love labour that was the problem. There was also a problem in not being able to figure out a solution. McDonnell (1999) put forward a thesis that “marital breakdown and separation is in essence a failure on the part of the couple to negotiate mutually acceptable roles within the marriage” (p.118). Kay said she could not get her husband to understand why she was upset that he did not take responsibility for doing housework. Breda blamed herself for not being assertive enough in explaining why she needed her husband to help. She felt she could have strengthened their relationship by discussing with her husband how they both felt about having a child with special needs. The women were unable to bridge the gap in perspective between their husbands and themselves. It was as if the men and the women were still living in separate spheres, as they had done in their parents’ generation, but that the women were no longer content with that arrangement.

As discussed above, McKeown *et al.* (2004) suggest that many of the problems that lead to separation result from what they describe as “a pattern of demand-withdrawal” (p.19). From a love labour perspective, the women’s ‘demands’ have to do with what they see as a failure on the men’s part to do love labour. The men’s ‘withdrawal’ is seen as a further failure to do love labour. Every act is interpreted as a sign of love or as a sign of the absence of love. From this perspective, sharing childcare and housework are about far more than ‘who does what and how often’. They are about whether ‘he loves me or loves me not’.

Problems with money, sex, resolving conflict, emotional reciprocity and being supportive in a crisis were also interpreted by many of the women in this study as signs of love not being shown and of love labour not being done. Where men failed to discuss the trouble in their work, their wives felt excluded and that their opinions and suggestions were not respected. Not having sex was interpreted as a sign of a relationship that was no longer emotionally close, but was never discussed. Where men withdrew and went silent if the women tried to bring up contentious issues, some of the women interpreted this as the men not caring

enough to listen and to take on board what was being said. A number of women also felt that they failed to be assertive enough and failed to make sufficient efforts to be heard.

It appears that some of the women lived for years, decades even, in marriages where there was very little emotional closeness. A minimum amount of love labour was being done which was sufficient to maintain the shell of a marriage but the shell had long since become empty. The shell offered some protection. It was familiar. It had the appearance of being like every body else's shell. Living outside it was not the norm and was almost unthinkable for this age group of women. Awareness that love labour was not being done was particularly apparent during holidays or at times of illness or bereavement. It took events like that to show that marriages were in serious trouble and that love labour was not being done by one or both of the marriage partners. Connectedness through the doing of love labour in all its aspects was a key expectation of marriage for the women in this study. Where love labour failed to be done, problems ensued and fragmentation or disconnection began to occur.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter was primarily concerned with beginning to explore the first two research questions. The first question asks about the influence of families and of society on how Irish women experience separation in midlife. The second question asks about the key contributory processes that lead to separation. Having only analysed data prior to separation, the conclusion reached in relation to the first question is that the women could not avoid being influenced by the attitudes to women, to marriage and to separation that they grew up with. They were surrounded, both at home and in school, by Catholic beliefs on lifelong marriage. Almost the only point on which they were all in agreement during the fourteen interviews was that separation was considered to be wrong by their families of origin. They realised as children that some marriages were unhappy but the message they received very loudly from their parents was that it was almost always wrong to leave a marriage. They understood that the threshold at which a separation could be triggered was only in the most extreme

circumstances. They understood that family came first and self came second and that it was a woman's responsibility to do all in her power to ensure that families remained intact.

The women were clearly embedded in a society which, during their formative years, viewed separation as a failure and they did not want to be failures and bring shame on themselves, on their children and on their families. The women went to enormous lengths to keep up the appearance that theirs was a happy home. They felt ashamed to admit that all was not well in their marriages. They remained closely connected to their families of origin and did not want to do anything to upset their parents or siblings.

As the women went through adolescence and young adulthood, significant changes were taking place in Ireland in attitudes towards women and their place in society. There was a shift towards more liberal beliefs and practices. Following an individual agenda which was different from family or religious beliefs became a possibility. The women were influenced by the changes in attitudes and by the increase in opportunities available to them. Many of them got professional qualifications and were employed full-time during their marriages. For some women, their expectations of their marriages were that a level of equality would exist between them and their husbands. All of them believed in the romantic ideal of marriage based on love and hoped that they would be loved, respected and valued by their husbands.

Given that there were only fourteen women and they all told such different stories, it was not possible to identify clear causal links between specific behaviours (problems with childcare, housework, money, sex, resolving conflict and emotional reciprocity) and the risk of separation. Smart (2007) suggests that it is preferable to "create a collage effect rather than a linear argument" (p.186). Different behaviours were important to different women. Different men were very good in some areas and lacking in others. The closest approximation to common denominators in the stories that described relationships which were deteriorating seemed to be whether the women felt loved or not and whether they felt love labour was, on balance, being done or not.

It is clear from the data that some of the relationships had fragmented long before separation actually took place. Other relationships, from the women's perspective at that stage, were still connected and were still 'good enough'. The next chapter will consider the data on the events that precipitated the separations, as defined by the act of moving out, and on the consequences that followed.

## **CHAPTER 7: 'DOING' SEPARATION**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will present and analyse data on the events and processes that occurred around the time of and subsequent to separation. The chapter is divided into four sections. It will examine material on the various losses and gains that women experienced during their transitions through separation (Ahrns, 2005). It will consider data on the manner in which relationships were reconfigured and on the extent to which they fragmented or remained connected following separation. The chapter will conclude by examining evidence of individualisation and identity shifts in the women's concluding comments.

### **Endings and Loss**

Ahrns describes transitions as "uncomfortable turning points" that signify the ending of something familiar and the beginning of something new (p.384). This section focuses on endings and loss rather than on beginnings and hope for the future. Most of the headings that follow refer to fragmentation and disconnection.

### **Woman as Initiator of the Ending of a Marriage**

Literature on women's experience of separation often distinguishes between women who initiate separation and those who do not initiate the separations (Sakraida, 2005). Of the fourteen women interviewed, six (Anne, Breda, Deidre, Eileen, Frances and Lisa) identified themselves as having initiated their separations. Most of these stated that they needed to leave their marriages in order to maintain their physical and mental health. It was not an individualised project of the self (Giddens, 1992). For most, it was about survival.

Deidre: I did what I did to look after myself and to get myself out of a situation that was going to basically destroy me if I didn't go. So it was a case of needs must.

Eileen: I just got so, so low. I just thought “I don’t want to live like this for the rest of my life. I just thought “I can’t take this anymore. I can’t take being told what I can and can’t do. Actually hearing myself say “I don’t want to die because of my marriage”, I started to listen to myself. I allowed myself to be angry. When I realised how invisible I was and that really I didn’t matter, once I was there every evening to put food on the table and to just sit with him, that’s all he wanted.

Frances, on the other hand, initiated separation when she and her husband reached an impasse about how and where they wanted to live the rest of their lives. He wanted to sell up, clear their debts and move to a different part of the country. The move would have taken them away from their children, her job and friends and she was not prepared to move. She felt it was an unreasonable request and that it spelled the end of their marriage.

Frances: The bills were mounting up on the hall table until there were about sixty letters and he wouldn’t open them. He just never bothered. Then he came up with this brilliant brain wave that we’d sell up.

L: Sell your family home?

Frances: Sell our home so that we’d have no debts. So I said “no, I couldn’t do that” and he just said “well, that’s what I need to do”. I said “well then the only solution is to separate”. I was business-like about it.

At the time, as Frances stated she was ‘business-like’ about the decision that she and her husband needed to go their separate ways, but this does not mean that she found the process easy or that it did not entail regret and a sense of loss. She is quoted later (on pages 211 and 234) as saying how difficult she found the process and below she states how many unanswered questions she is left with:

I often ask myself “if I loved him enough, would I have gone? And if he loved me enough, would he have stayed? Would he have put the gun to my head?

It is clear from these quotations that the women who initiated separation did not do so lightly. The gradual deterioration of relationships and the emotional distancing from partners which were described in the last chapter lead to the women's decisions to separate from their husbands. These decisions were motivated for most of the women by fears that their physical or mental health would break down if they stayed. The decisions had to do with survival rather than having anything to do with self actualisation or individualisation. Most of the initiators felt they had to get out in order to survive.

### **Sudden Endings**

Some of the separations happened very abruptly in the end. After years of unhappiness, matters came to a head and ended in a matter of days. Anne described a row over a radiator and who was going to drive her son to the bus as "the straw that broke the camel's back". Breda described her husband's refusal to help her daughter prepare for the Special Olympics as the "tipping point". Each woman remembered with absolute clarity the details of the encounters on the day the decision was made to separate.

Deidre: I can still see the day that I said it to him. He was lighting the fire in there and I came in from school. He must have been off work for the day and I just blurted it out. I said "we can't go on like this. I want to separate.

Eileen: When I was asked if I wanted to go on holiday and I thought "I can't do this anymore, I can't do this anymore". So after a few minutes, I sat there thinking "no, I don't want to do this", I said "no, I don't want to go". A few days later, we were to go to a wedding and I said "I don't want to go to the wedding, in actual fact, I want a break.

Lisa: So the way it happened was he was buying a new dining room table which was all going to cost two or three thousand, a big, old mahogany thing, and I said, "K, I don't want you to buy that," and I kind of knew I was only going to get one chance to say this, and he said "why?" and I kind of rehearsed it, "because there is no point in buying a new dining

room table if there is only one of you to use it,” and he said “what do you mean,” and I said, “I want a separation.

It is not hard to imagine the men’s shock in these situations if this was the first time separation was mentioned. One man was unsuspectingly lighting the fire, another man was planning a holiday and a day out at a wedding and the third man was thinking about investing in a new dining room table. Where the wife was the person who initiated the separation, it seemed to come as a total shock to the husbands. They had not seen it coming. They had not dreamed that their wives would ever go so far as to leave. There seems to have been a disconnection between the person who was considering leaving and the person who was about to be left. It seems to be an accumulation of the communication difficulties and distancing that were features of so many of the marriages. These couples had been failing to communicate for years. They had failed to talk, to listen or to make themselves heard, so maybe it is not surprising that they had failed to communicate that they were thinking of leaving:

Breda: I don’t think he believed it until a solicitor’s letter came in the door.

Lisa: Either he wasn’t listening or didn’t have the capacity to process it emotionally. Well it was news to him. He started to cry, and I was very perplexed by that. He’d no idea, and I said “but how could you not have any idea,” “Oh, I just thought that was just you and the change of life” and he went into a big depression and didn’t know what to do.

What is emerging is a huge gulf in understanding between spouses on fundamental issues such as what each person wanted from the relationship and how distressed and hurt they were when, as they saw it, love labour was not being engaged in by their husbands. It was as if one person had already left the marriage for years before they discussed their decision with the other person and that they just presumed that the other person ‘knew’. The reason the husbands did not ‘know’ was because they had not understood how unhappy their wives were. It had not crossed their minds that their wives might leave.

The only couple (Mary) for whom separation came close to being agreed upon was the couple who had lived abroad for thirteen years and who had gone to counselling together. They lived in a society in which divorce was far more common than it was in Ireland. They also lived in a society in which it was not considered abnormal to go to counselling. These factors may have made a difference.

### **Endings Due To Infidelity**

As shown in Chapter 2, infidelity is a common cause of separation (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Amato, 2000; Lowenstein, 2007). According to Subotnik and Harris (2005), it is the meaning the other spouse attaches to the infidelity which determines the decision made about the marriage. They also suggest that a person's life stage has an impact on the decision they make. "We have seen older women who have looked the other way when extramarital involvement occurred rather than risk age bias in the job market or worry about living alone" (Subotnik and Harris, 2005: 118). Looking the other way was not the option chosen by the women in this study, as their stories will illustrate.

Six (Catherine, Geraldine, Helen, Irene, Jane and Nora) of the fourteen women identified their husbands' sexual or emotional infidelity as being the precipitating reason for their separations. In all six cases the women described how, with the benefit of hindsight, they could track the signs that their relationships had been deteriorating and that love labour was not being done. The build up to the women finding out or to the men disclosing their affairs was characterised by the men spending very little time at home. Because of the lies, deceit and denials involved in these cases, there were many unanswered questions and many pieces of information missing. This resulted in the women struggling to make sense of what exactly had been happening and how long the affairs had been going on.

Helen: He just started withdrawing, withdrawing, withdrawing. He wouldn't come home. I now know he was having the affair at that stage. And he still, to this day, has not admitted that to anybody. I had suspected and I started going through his stuff and I found receipts and visa bills for

accommodation. He was supposed to have been abroad working and I found receipts for another part of Ireland where he was and all this type of stuff. I did say it to him and he made a laugh out of me and made a mockery out of me.

Irene: G said to me that we needed to talk and that he was going to leave now that my youngest daughter had reached eighteen and that he wanted a new life before he died, that he had lived my life and that was it, he was leaving. I remember we were walking down the canal. We went out for walks all the time. I said “so who is involved? What are you going to do?” He said “there’s nobody involved.” But I knew from the beginning that there was no return because I found tickets on his desk that were booked to Spain the day after he told me. So it was well planned. I found the tickets, paid by somebody else’s credit card. I thought “every body knows, oh my god, everybody knows”. It was a terrible feeling that I didn’t twig this. Betrayal like this I cannot stomach. He has hurt me so much. He has hurt the kids which is ten times the hurt for me, feeling their hurt. I would not ever, ever return to that because I couldn’t trust. The trust is just gone, majorly gone. I mean he is a cheat. He is a liar.

The breaching of trust, the sense of betrayal, the hurt caused by the lies and denials involved in the infidelity are the antithesis of the concept of love labour discussed in the last chapter. The women described how they hated having to search for evidence in a bid to find out what had been going on but that they could no longer trust their husbands to tell the truth. Some of the women had their suspicions for a while and went searching for proof; searching drawers, pockets, mobile phones, emails. Others, like Irene, had no clue. Disclosure came as a huge shock.

### **Storying the Ending**

The women found telling their children and family and friends that they were separating to be one of the most difficult parts of the process.

Helen: Now when I finally did tell my parents, it was dreadful. Telling the children and telling my parents were the worst days of my life.

L: Cos that makes it real.

Helen: Yes. It really did.

In many cases, there was no agreement between spouses on when to tell people or on what to tell them.

Irene: I needed time to process what was going on. He didn't allow me that really because he was very quick to tell. As soon as he met somebody, he'd just say out to them "we're separated. That's it". I hadn't even told my sisters or anybody 'cos I thought "I need time to think about this. What's the impact on our lives?" It was the year my daughter was doing her Leaving Cert. and I didn't want to upset that.

As the following examples show, it appeared that each partner storied the reason for the separation differently.

He never acknowledged the upset his drinking was causing to our daughter (Anne).

He never acknowledged he was having an affair (Helen)

He told the children we were not getting on (which was not true). He neglected to tell them he had met another woman (Nora).

He told his friends the separation was amicable (at a point at which she felt the decision had not really been made) (Kay)

Again, the differences in how the spouses storied their separations and the manner in which they chose to speak about them reflected the different points each partner was at in the journey of separation. Those who initiated separation were much further along in the process. They had had time to make sense of and justify why separation was the best option for them at this stage of their lives. Those who had only just realised that separation was about to happen needed time to process the news. (The same is likely to be true of children, as will be discussed later.) Many of the women felt they were not given the time to process

what was happening and they were hurt by the manner in which on the story behind their separation was presented.

### **Moving Out- Disconnecting**

While the statement about wanting to separate often seemed to come ‘out of the blue’, actually moving out took several weeks/ months, or four years in Breda’s case. The women described the period between the time the decision was made and one partner actually moved out as “particularly harrowing”. Deidre described it “as the most difficult of the whole thing”.

Deidre: The strain of separating but continuing to live together. I was still cooking for him. At that stage my daughter was about sixteen. B was in Dublin but home at the weekends so I was trying to keep things looking normal. How could I say to her when she came home from school “here’s your dinner and we’ll sit down and have ours” and then her Dad comes in at half six and he has to get his own dinner? I wouldn’t do that to her, it wasn’t that I wanted to give him his dinner really. So much of it was about trying to do the right thing to make it easier for them.

Research (O’Hara, 2011) shows that there are more separations during boom years than during recessions. Due to the recession, there may be couples who cannot afford to separate in Ireland at present. This study illustrates how difficult this period can be for everyone concerned. The quotation from Deidre shows that, even in situations where there is no longer any love, women continue to do the work of love labour for the sake of providing a comfortable home atmosphere for their children.

### **The Pain and the Shame**

All of the women, both initiators and non initiators, described feeling pain and shame at the time of their separations. Wineman (1999) refers to this stage as “the horror of it all”. She uses this phrase to describe the depression, fear, loss, shame and general upset that women felt immediately following separation. The quotations which follow tell something of the pain that the women in this study felt at the time of their separations.

Helen: I stayed awake all night and worried, worried, worried and my face showed it, it was very thin. I was gaunt looking. I would sit up. I just couldn't sleep. I'd come down stairs and just didn't know what to do, where to turn, what to do.

L: How much time did you spend crying?

Helen: Loads. And I had panic attacks because I was just afraid. I was so fearful of the future. I was so fearful. What are we going to do? The girls came first. I don't know how I was getting through days. It was a complete haze, what was going on, trying to keep it from everybody.

L: We are looking at the events surrounding the separation. Can you remember how you felt when he said "I'm leaving"?

Irene: Well I was just overwhelmed really. My heart sank. I got a terrible pain in my chest or in my breast. I don't know where it was. I remember thinking as I was walking down the canal "Oh my God, the pain". But I was overwhelmed by the thought that I was betrayed. I remember thinking in my head "I mustn't react. I mustn't lash out. I need to take on board all what's happening here." I used to write. I wrote as much down as I possibly could, I was trying to piece things together. I was feeling so hurt. The pain was unbelievable really.

The language used by the women in these quotations is the language of trauma, loss and grief. Worden's (1991) first two tasks of grieving, to accept the reality of the loss and to work through the pain, seem particularly relevant for what the women felt they needed to do in order to cope with the trauma of separation. They needed to accept the reality that the separation was happening, that there was no way back and they needed to deal with the pain and try to keep functioning. As well as describing the pain they felt, both of these women described the shame they felt. They had just discovered that their husbands were cheating on them, yet the women, as will be illustrated in the quotations that follow, were the ones feeling ashamed, as will be illustrated below.

Several of the other women also talked about feeling shame and a sense of failure and worrying that their 'failure' would be reflected upon their children. Bateson (1989) talks about how separation is often seen as a failure to 'succeed' in a relationship. It may involve failure to choose the right person or failure to make the relationship work. Both involve mistakes (Bateson, 1989). The sense of failure was felt not only by the initiators of the separations but also by the non initiators. The women felt that they did not 'fit' into society anymore and that they had lost their identity and their status. While they had not been made to feel like outcasts, they still felt ashamed and embarrassed.

L: How was it your failure?

Helen: I don't even know how to explain it. I did feel a failure and I still feel ashamed, partly. And then I felt for the children that they were coming from a broken home and that stigma, I suppose. Even though I know it's...not like that now.

L: Do you think that still exists?

Helen: No, it doesn't and I know there's so much of it (separation) but there's just something there, you know. Failure I think it was.

L: What is your identity now, are you a separated women?

Jane: Oh, I hate it, hate it! I don't know what I am. I have a major issue with the "separated women", major stigma, major. I just didn't want to be that, I never asked to be that single woman. Hate it!

L: What does it mean to you? What is it that you don't like about it?

Jane: The stigma, on my children, and one of the girls said "I didn't ask to be from a broken home." T said: "I didn't ask to be walking up the aisle without my father," ... it's just this thing here, no ring here.

L: What's the shame about?

Irene: I presume because the person I have chosen in life as part of my family, I got it so wrong, maybe. My sadness is for my kids that now this is changing our history forever. They are now from what they call a "broken home" and I knew they'd be so hurt. I suppose I felt some

responsibility really as well. I felt so alone at the time....The first year was just so difficult really... Of course I was angry. Of course I was in disbelief.

The women's description of shame is similar to a finding by van Schalkwyk (2005) in her South African study. The women's sense of shame came, not so much from how they were treated by others as, from within themselves. The beliefs about marriage and the attitudes to separation that they had internalised as children came back to haunt them. There were several references to 'broken homes' and to the stigma their children would be subject to as a result of coming from a 'broken home'. Like the women in the South African study and the women in McDaniel and Coleman's study (2003) the women in this study also blamed themselves for the failure of their marriages. The women in each study felt they were expected to oversee the running of 'happy families', an essential part of which involved keeping their husbands happy and that somehow they had failed to do this.

It is also noteworthy how many of the women refer to the stigma for their children of coming from a 'broken home'. This topic will be discussed further when discussing post-separation parenting.

### **Discussion: Endings and Loss**

While the concept of transition involving both losses and gains underpins the discussion in the early part of this chapter, all of the headings used in this section involve fragmentation and refer to different aspects of decoupling or disconnecting from a marital relationship. As mentioned in Chapter 4, separation involves several losses (Ahrons, 2005). There is of the loss of a partner, the loss of an intact family, the loss of identity as part of a couple, the loss of a life style, the loss of friendships associated with being married and the loss of a future together. Sakraida (2005) suggested that because women at midlife are likely to be leaving long-term relationships, divorce at this stage involves more significant changes in relationships, routines and roles than for younger women. By midlife, patterns established during marriage may have been in existence for decades (Sakraida, 2005). This was the case for the women in this study. The shortest

marriage amongst the fourteen women was twenty years and the longest was thirty-five years. Most of the women had known their husbands for over half of their life spans. Some of them had met in their teens and had never been with another man.

Coming to terms with all the losses involved in separating requires a period of mourning which is, in some respects, similar to the mourning that takes place following a death (Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). Practitioners (Fisher and Alberti, 2006) who work with people following separation base much of their work on the stages of mourning (Kubler-Ross, 1997). A key difference between coping with death and coping with separation, according to the women in this study, is the shame and betrayal that they felt about separation. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there are also differences in how support is provided. There are no communal rituals which support a person through separation. There are no role models within Irish families for how to do separation. Nobody in the study, neither initiators nor non-initiators, wanted or expected their marriages to end in separation. Nobody in the study found it to be an easy transition.

### **Legal, Financial and Housing Arrangements**

The next section will deal with the legal arrangements the women in the study made about their accommodation and income following separation. These aspects are closely linked in that legal arrangements are usually required to divide assets which have previously been jointly owned and arrangements about income are required in order to make provision for children and for spouses who may not be in employment. Legal, financial and housing arrangements have to do with disconnecting from a former spouse at a practical and at an emotional level. The arrangements entail disentangling ownership of joint assets and making provision to live separately into the future. A range of emotions are triggered by this formal decoupling. Table 4 overleaf summarises the legal, housing and financial situations of the interviewees.

**Table 4: Legal, Financial and Housing Arrangements**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Length Separated</b>	<b>Mediation/ Separation/ Divorce</b>	<b>Current Ages of Children</b>	<b>Housing Wife</b>	<b>Maintenance Wife/ children</b>	<b>Income</b>
<b>Anne</b>	2 years	Mediation Failed - Separation pending	1 under 18 1 over 18	Private rental + 1 child	Nil	Professional
<b>Breda</b>	7	Divorced	2 over 18 1 with special Needs	Private rental + 1 child	Nil	Carer
<b>Catherine</b>	1	No proceedings	3 over 18 Left home	Family home	Nil	Professional
<b>Deidre</b>	5	Separation Agreed in Mediation	1 student 1 due home from abroad	Family home- She bought him out. Mortgage until 70	Education costs shared	Professional
<b>Eileen</b>	1	Mediation Failed- Will divorce In 2012 (N.I. case)	3 left home 2 post grads	Private rental	Wife's rent paid	Professional
<b>Frances</b>	5	Mediation Failed- Judicial Separation	3 adults (1 single mother and child with wife)	New house Mortgage until 70	Nil	Professional
<b>Geraldine</b>	5	Mediation Failed- Divorced	3 children in Third level	Family home until 2017	500 euro Per month	Clerical Worker
<b>Helen</b>	4	Mediation Failed- Divorce pending	2 in Third level 1 graduate Abroad	Family home	Nil	P/t Clerical Worker
<b>Irene</b>	2	Mediation pending	3 in Third Level	Rented family home	Nil	Professional
<b>Jane</b>	2	Judicial Separation pending	1 in Third level 2 working	Family home	100 euro p/w to wife + College costs	P/t shop assistant
<b>Kay</b>	6	Mediation Failed Divorced	1 in Third level 1 working Abroad	Family home	Nil	Professional
<b>Lisa</b>	4	Separation Agreed in Mediation	2 in Third level 1 working	She bought a new house. Mortgage until 69	Education costs shared	Professional
<b>Mary</b>	2	Separation/ Divorce agreed	1 child in Secondary school	Family home with child until she reaches 18.	Lump sum	Student (Ex executive)
<b>Nora</b>	1	No proceedings	1 in Third level 1 working	Family home for sale	Social welfare	Shop assistant

### **Initiating Legal Proceedings - Public Ending**

One of the difficulties discussed by Coulter (2008) and Lunn *et al.* (2009) in gathering statistics in Ireland on the prevalence of separation is that the figures emanating from Court applications for Judicial Separation and Divorce do not tally with the number of women who report themselves to be separated in the Census returns. The suggestion made is that some couples separate but do not legally formalise the separation. As can be seen from Table 4, three of the women (Catherine, Irene and Nora) are in this position.

Catherine: We have no separation agreement. I'll leave it be for the moment.

I didn't want to do it, head in the sand stuff. I'm not sure.

L. What sort of arrangements have you come to, so far?

Nora: None. He went to the solicitor first and I think it wasn't really a separation. What we wanted was to write down an agreement about what he would pay and what I would pay. Now unfortunately, our solicitor died. But no, we've left it and I'm not forcing the issue of a separation.

The table shows that these two women were separated for less than two years. Both of them had been through previous periods of separation followed by periods of reconciliation. They still seemed ambiguous about whether or not they were hoping to be reconciled in the future. There may have been some element of denial that the separation was actually final. The third woman (Irene) talked about only being ready two years after she separated, to even start the mediation process.

Time and emotional strength seem to be factors in readiness to initiate legal proceedings. Going to a solicitor and going to court make separation public and a legal reality. Speaking to a solicitor moves personal and previously secret relationship difficulties into a public domain. It involves 'washing dirty linen' in public. It takes some people time to accept that reconciliation is not going to happen and that the separation is final. It takes emotional strength to begin to deal with the practicalities and legal formalities involved in separating. It signals

the official fragmenting of a marital relationship and time is needed to process the loss of lifestyle and identity at an emotional level.

One of the grounds on which divorce can be granted in Ireland under the Family Law (Divorce) Act (1996) is that a couple have lived apart for four of the previous five years (Nestor, 2006). Seven of the fourteen women in the study had been separated for three years or less at the time of their interviews. As discussed, three had not initiated legal proceedings, three were in the process of getting judicial separations, five had separation agreements/judicial separations and three were divorced. This mirrors what Lunn *et al.* (2009) describe as “a patchwork of legal remedies, from de facto and legal separations to full divorce” (p.57).

Ireland is unusual in an international context in having such a two-stage legal approach to the dissolution of marriage. As mentioned, the expectation when divorce was introduced was that judicial separation would no longer be required (Coulter, 2008). Coulter suggests that the reason so many Irish women initiate proceedings for judicial separations is because they cannot wait four years to have arrangements made about ownership of the family home, about custody, access and maintenance of children.

Most of the children in the families surveyed were older teenagers at the time of their parents' separation so custody and access were not an issue. Ownership of the family home, payment of household bills and maintenance of young adults who were in third-level education were, however, seen as urgent issues that the women in this study needed to address sooner than the four years required to proceed to divorce, hence their decisions to apply for judicial separations. They also mentioned a desire ‘to move on with their lives’ as being part of their motivation for applying for judicial separations. Going to court signified an attempt, not only on a practical level but also on an emotional level, to get some degree of closure, to begin to plan for the future to forge a new identity and to make a new beginning.

The stipulation that couples be separated for four of the previous five years before applying for a divorce is longer in Ireland than the period required in other countries. The period required in the U.K is two years. The four-year waiting period did not emerge in this study as a major concern. Only one of the women (Mary) felt that it might be an issue for younger women who might wish to have children with a new partner. None of the women in the study were in new relationships at the time of the interviews. (This point will be discussed further when discussing the women's social lives following separation.)

### **Negotiating Endings: Experiences of Mediation**

Solicitors are obliged to tell separating couples about the existence of the Mediation Service but attendance at mediation is voluntary. Erwin (2007) drew attention to the low uptake of mediation in 2006, quoting figures which showed that only 1,500 couples used mediation out of the 27,000 who went to the District and Circuit Courts. According to Conneely (2002), half the couples who attended mediation succeeded in reaching agreements. A much lower proportion of the women in this study managed to reach agreements through mediation. Of the eight women who used the service, only two succeeded in reaching an agreement.

Deidre: The mediation was absolutely fantastic. I mean he was very cooperative in that. It made the whole thing very straight forward to have somebody else there to help us sort it out.

Lisa did not have such a positive experience of mediation but they still managed to hammer out an agreement.

Lisa: It got very nasty in the mediation. He kind of had broken down.

She explained that "it was not a difficult one" because they were both teachers.

In her typology of separating couples, Moore (2010) found that "egalitarians" (p.135) were more likely to have settled their legal affairs through mediation. She also identified that they were more likely to have been dual-income couples and to have completed third-level education. Lisa and Deidre fit these criteria in that

both they and their husbands worked in the public sector, had very similar salaries and pensions and had completed third-level education. The fact that Lisa and Deidre identified themselves as the initiators of their separations may also have had a bearing on their success in reaching an agreement. They both wanted out of their marriages and stated that they would have agreed to almost anything.

However, the stories the other women told about their experiences in mediation were very different.

Anne: We had nine sessions of mediation. Six is normal/average. I bent over backwards to try to settle things over our house, that's what we have to settle, and I felt I went to the very limit and as far as I could go on that and he just wasn't prepared to go there, to meet me at all. He was pushing, pushing, pushing for me to accept minimum all the time. So since mediation I have had no contact with him.

Frances described how they attended 3 sessions of mediation but that her husband felt the female mediator was biased against him and would not go back. Helen started mediation prior to her husband moving out and described it as a "disaster". She talked at length about how hurt she was during the whole mediation process.

Helen: I was in the waiting room and he came in and completely ignored me. Then he marched into the room with his suit on him, with his laptop and said "Oh hello, how are you" to the man and the woman mediators. That man just came down so hard on me. I still think I'm going to do something about it even a few years later. It still bothers me how he treated me. We started off on basic stuff like salaries that you can't lie about and how much it's costing for this, this and this. Then he started bringing in "she's stopping me from seeing the children." He started making up lies then about things that I had said on the phone and everything like that. I walked out afterwards and said 'I can't go back to that again'. I was an absolute wreck.

Geraldine also described how powerless she felt during the mediation meetings;

Geraldine: We started this mediation process and I was reading those leaflets and I was very upset about it. We started the process and it was going ok. I actually didn't rate the mediator but he rated her even less. If he got stroppy at me (I was completely dominated by him at this stage), you know, if he got into a strop about something, she usually went his way. And I remember ringing her and telling her this. She was very defensive and said 'I don't and I'm not'. And whatever way he wanted it that's the way she said we should do it. I just agreed because I just couldn't argue anymore. (This case was subsequently settled in Court.)

What seems to be emerging from the stories about failed attempts at mediation is how difficult it can be for couples who are going through a separation to even sit in the same room as each other, never mind negotiate calmly about ownership of a family home and payment of household bills. Even the presence of a neutral mediator does not guarantee that meetings will be conducted in a calm and reasoned manner. It appears that feelings about the events leading to the separation and problems during the marriage are not easily put to one side. Moore (2010) and Mahon and Moore (2011), in their studies on post-separation parenting, came to a similar conclusion. Their conclusion was that patterns established during marriage continued into post-separation relationships. Couples who had been unable to communicate on a deep level during their marriage, to do the work needed for love labour, were unlikely to be able to change their communication style dramatically post-separation.

Another aspect coming through in these extracts has to do with the gendered nature of how negotiations were conducted during mediation. Anne mentioned how she felt pressurised by her husband to accept far less than she felt was equitable. Both Helen and Geraldine felt that their husbands were given far more credence than they were during the mediation process. (Frances' husband felt the opposite because the mediator was asking him to take some responsibility for financial matters that he was not prepared to deal with and did not want to hear about.) While mediators may try to adopt a neutral position in negotiations, the

women in this study still felt at a disadvantage and that their husbands held a dominant position.

The timing of mediation and the need for counselling before attending mediation would appear to be important factors in whether mediation is likely to succeed or not. Discussion in the previous section on separation as a series of losses which take time to mourn means that people are likely to be in a very fragile state at the time at which they need to make important decisions about their homes, themselves and their children. For many of the women, things said by their husbands during mediation meetings led to them having no subsequent communication with their husbands. Rather than mediation resulting in agreement, it was the arena in which disagreements became even clearer.

### **Significance of the Ages of Children**

The reason given by both men and women in the AARP study (Montenegro *et al.*, 2004) for delaying separation until midlife was because of the perceived negative effect it would have on children. This was also a consideration for the women who initiated separation in this study. Children constitute some of the connecting threads in an otherwise fragmenting relationship.

Deidre: I hung on with the children in mind for a long time. When I came to the conclusion that this was not going to fix itself, it was probably maybe three/four years before I actually did it. There was either one of them doing their Leaving Cert. or one of them was moving into college or there seemed to be always some reason why this was not a good year. Whether that was me putting it off or out of genuine concern for them, I don't know.

Eileen waited twenty-three years because she thought separating would be bad for her children;

Eileen: I did think of leaving him and I had planned what I was going to do, where I was going to live and get a job etc. but at the time, in the

1980s, there was a lot of talk about divorce being bad for children and that they were better with both parents. I was taking that on board.

Of the four women who left their family homes, Anne and Breda took their daughters with them, one daughter stayed at home to finish her Leaving Cert. and Eileen waited until her three children had left home before leaving.

Only Mary had a child under seventeen at the time of the interviews. Some children had already left home which meant that their mothers were living alone following separation. Weston and Smyth (2000) in their Australian study on the financial consequences of separation for women found that women who separated after the age of forty-five were the most disadvantaged because most of them were found to be either living alone or as single parents. Women living alone into old age could have care implications both for their families and for the State, as well as being a worry for the women themselves. Other women experienced the 'empty nest' syndrome at around the same time as the loss of their husbands as most of their children were in their late teens at the time of the separation. A series of losses came together.

Deidre: A year and a half after my husband left I knew that G was going to be leaving home in Sept. and I was going to be on my own. The build up to that and the thought of that ....I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I was in bits.

Some of the women described their children leaving home as a greater loss than their husbands moving out.

Kay: My daughter has just moved out this summer. I have said to people I think this will be harder than separation because it's a whole new life.

The majority of the children were still at college and their family home (in which most of their mothers continued to reside) was still very much their home base. Very few of the children were totally financially self sufficient. Their mother's domicile still tended to be where adult children gravitated towards. There were

clear expenses involved for the mothers in their adult children continuing to spend periods of time at home, yet as will be shown later, very few of the mothers received any financial support in this regard. Weston and Smyth (2000) found that the presumption in legal settlements that young adults would be financially independent of their parents by the age of twenty-three did not reflect the reality in many families. They suggested that by the time young people finished education and were financially able to provide for themselves many of them were aged around twenty-seven years of age rather than twenty-three. For some of the women in this study, this finding reflects their situation. Several of the children had gone on to study at Masters and at Doctorate level. They still relied on some financial support from their mothers.

### **Decisions about the Family Home**

Studies in Ireland (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011) show that, in the vast majority of cases, mothers remain in the family home with their children following separation. In this study nine of the fourteen women remained in the same family homes following separation. For Geraldine and Mary part of their separation agreements is that their homes may have to be sold once the children reach eighteen or twenty-three years of age (if in education). Of the five who moved house, two were in a position to buy their own houses (but will have mortgages to pay until they are seventy) and the remaining three are in temporary private-rented accommodation.

Breda: The family home is still waiting to be sold. As part of the divorce agreement, I am to get 55% and he is to get 45% but that is still waiting to be sold. One of the other things that happened at the time was I had the opportunity to live in a relative's house. Because I think if I hadn't had any place to go, I probably wouldn't have gone.

L: He wasn't going and you had a place to go?

Breda: Yes. I had a place to go which is kind of a temporary arrangement still. So it's very insecure.

That Breda said she might not have left home if it she had not got a house to go to is a noteworthy comment as it raises questions about whether women leave

their marriages because they can or whether other women stay because they have no money and no place to go. The question about whether women leave because they can will be taken up again later.

One feature of separating after so many years of marriage was that the couples either had no mortgages or had very small amounts outstanding on their homes. They were, therefore, in a position to buy their husbands out or to pay for alternative housing. Four of the husbands remained in the family homes after their wives left. Two bought new houses and six were living with new partners in private-rented accommodation and two were living alone in privately rented apartments.

The desire to hold onto their homes for the sake of the children and for themselves was mentioned by several of the women. Smart (2007) talks about a home being far more than a house; it contains family history and possessions to which meanings and memories attach. For children, their home represents security and continuity. The extent to which children's lives changed on a daily basis has been found to be a key factor in how they adapted to separation (Hogan *et al.*, 2002). A change of house might also mean a change of school and the loss of friends. Most of the mothers were anxious to avoid that level of change all at once, both for their own sakes and for their children's sake.

Helen: It's the girls' home. Okay, my eldest girl is away. I don't know whether she'll come back or not. I have two other girls. Their friends are around and everything like that but I want it, yes, I want it.

Frances: Our house had been up for sale about a year at this stage and it had sold five times. I just could not sign on the dotted line. I couldn't let go of my family home, my memories, my children's. Could not do it. Didn't want to know. And I tried everything to hold onto my home.

Frances is expressing the deep sense of loss she felt at having to sell her home. She clearly ascribed important meaning to the house in which she and her husband had raised their children together. She described the night she sold her

house and signed her separation agreement as the “darkest night of her life”. She officially lost her husband and her home on the same day.

Smart (2007) also talks about how the meaning and feelings associated with a family home may change following an event like a separation. Following divorce, the sorting out is forced rather than undertaken voluntarily. Feelings of hurt, pain and regret are revived. “This forced sharing out of possessions is in effect a dismantling of what was planned to be a joint future” (Smart, 2007:169). As the quotations above illustrate, some of the women wanted to hold onto their homes at all costs, others no longer felt the same about their houses and wondered if they might be better to sell.

Deidre: I bought him out of the house. I had to take out a boosted mortgage on top of taking over the balance of the mortgage. He had to get another mortgage as well. My salary just meets my mortgage and I have a mortgage until I’m seventy. In the last couple of years I would have felt that I would like to move out of here and make a fresh start in a new house but the way things went, it’s just not the time.

According to Smart (2007), the sorting out of things becomes a metaphor for the sorting out of relations and memories. Clearing out the clutter of previous relationships often comes to symbolise a way of moving on and making a new beginning.

L: What about the fact that it’s full of memories of him? Does that bother you?

Helen: No because he wouldn’t have had much to do with deciding things. It would have been me that would have done it.

L: Have you taken down his photographs off the wall?

Helen: Yes. I didn’t do it all at once, for the girls’ sake. Family pictures, family occasions have gradually come down. I wanted to change my bedroom instantly. I painted it and re-arranged the furniture.

Because Helen's husband had been absent from home so often, he had not left his mark on it to any great extent. She felt it was hers. Courts may or may not take the same view about the meaning of family homes. According to Mahon and Moore (2011), in family law cases, family homes are treated as assets which women are granted in lieu of maintenance. The presumption is that the women can sell their homes and liquidate their asset. Some of the women did not see selling their home as an option.

The other issue that arose in relation to houses was the issue of maintenance. Some women were initially at a loss when they could no longer rely on their husbands to fix things around the house. Catherine described how if a picture fell off the wall, she was convinced that this meant that the roof was about to fall in. While initially the women worried about whom they were going to get to fix things in the house and how they were going to pay for house repairs and maintenance, in time, they sourced people who could help and were pleased with their ability to manage things that they had never done before. Their confidence in their ability to manage on their own seemed to increase with time. It was part of them developing a new identity which did not depend on a man to fix things.

### **Income**

Table 3 shows that nine of the fourteen women are employed full-time, seven in professional capacities and two in secretarial positions. Two of the women are part-time shop assistants, another is a part-time care assistant, another is a part-time student (ex business executive) and another is in receipt of Carer's Allowance. These occupations mirror the type of occupations that females are typically employed in Ireland. The numbers in employment (9 full-time and 2 part-time) are higher than the national figure for female employment which stands at 56.4% (CSO, 2011). In his comparative study of separation across Europe in 2004, Uunk found that in Denmark, Finland and Portugal, two-thirds of the women worked in paid employment prior to divorce, whereas in Ireland, half of the women worked before separation. The figures for this study are closer to the other European countries than to the Irish figures and are indicative of the middle class backgrounds of the participants.

In relation to maintenance, six of the fourteen women stated that they were getting nothing from their husbands. For some, who were working full-time and had good salaries and for the woman who got a lump sum settlement, the lack of maintenance was not a major problem but others stated that they were struggling financially.

Breda: We separated and divorced at the same time in 2007 and he has never paid a penny maintenance for me or for my daughter.

L: Even though she has special needs?

Breda: It doesn't make a difference once she is over eighteen. The roof over my head is not secure. I have no income into the future apart from Social Welfare. I am worried about what will happen to my daughter if I get sick. Sometimes it's hard to see if the gains balance the pain.

A further six women were getting some maintenance and help towards costs for children who were still in third-level education but were finding it difficult to manage financially.

Geraldine: When we had our judicial separation, the judge decided he should pay me 500 euros a month to be divided equally between the three children. Now 3 does not go into 500, that's all I get...I pay all the bills on 500 a month. And once F reaches 23, it will be one-third less and I don't know how I'm going to manage. I'm going to have to keep working. I'm not on the bread line. I have a permanent and pensionable job. It looks as if I'm going to be working full-time unless I win the lotto or something!

Eileen and Jane had very little money to live on while they were waiting for matters to be sorted out in Court. Both had stayed home to raise their children and were only able to find part-time, low-paid jobs, despite one being a nurse and the other being a social studies graduate.

Jane: Now, this present moment my husband gives me one hundred euros a week, one hundred euros a week. I work part-time, 20 hrs a week. That's what I survive on.

He's starving me of money, and if I had my way, I'd say, keep the 100 euros, I don't want anything off you, but I need the 100 euros.

The only maintenance Eileen got was that her rent was paid by her husband:

I do worry about whether he will continue to pay the rent each month.

The maintenance arrangements described in this study are similar to those found in Mahon and Moore (2011) who, as quoted in Chapter 3, concluded that "maintenance payments to wives are very rare and a degree of self-sufficiency, later if not sooner, is expected of them, even if they have been full-time carers of their children" (Mahon and Moore, 2011: 54). There is very little evidence in this study of either compensatory or rehabilitative payments being made to women in recognition of the time they spent caring for their children. Sheehan and Fehlberg (2000) also drew attention to problems with the "equal treatment" approach taken in family law cases in Australia. They point out that the two usual pathways out of poverty, working and re-partnering, may not be options for women due to caring responsibilities for family members. Women who separate in midlife may not have caring responsibilities for children but they may find it difficult to find work and, as Hilton and Anderson (2009) found, they were also "more likely to have difficulty finding new mates to share their economic burdens with" than younger women (p. 312). As mentioned, at the time of the interviews, none of the women were involved in new relationships.

In terms of pension provision, six women stated that they will have full pensions on retirement. Kay will have a full pension, but her husband will be entitled to a portion of it. Two of the women entered the work force later and will have small pensions. Four have no pension provisions and Mary hopes to live off the lump sum settlement from her divorce. This pattern of pension provision is similar to that found in Nevada by Hilton and Anderson (2009). They found that midlife women had fewer pension entitlements (due to interrupted or part-time work

histories) and less time to save for retirement. They were also more likely to be living alone which is more costly than if living costs can be shared.

Several of the women commented that “this should have been their time” (Nora). With the mortgage paid and the kids reared, there should have been money for holidays together and to be able to look forward to retirement. Instead the women needed to continue to work full-time for as long as possible and were facing into retirement alone and, in some cases, with a mortgage and inadequate pension cover.

### **Discussion: Public Endings and Division of Assets**

Transition is a useful concept to use when examining separation in the sense that it denotes that separation is not just the end of a marriage but is also the beginning of a new life for both spouses. Legal proceedings involve a public ending of a marriage and division of assets with a view to future needs. As such, court attendance signifies an ending but also a new beginning. It marks a clear point in the process of transition to a different future.

The dividing and finalising aspects will be discussed first. As mentioned, separation entails coming to terms with a series of losses and involves an emotional process which is similar in many respects to coming to terms with bereavement (Ahrns, 2005; Fisher and Alberti, 2006; O’Hara, 2011). Feelings of shock, denial, anger and depression need to be worked through before a person arrives at acceptance and begins to adapt to the situation. Those who initiate separation seem to have done the equivalent of ‘anticipatory grief work’ prior to separating. For the non-initiators, women, men and children, separation can appear to happen unexpectedly and suddenly and require a longer period of adjustment.

For these women, marriage largely began in a church with family and friends celebrating together. Marriage entailed a public commitment and a promise for the future. Ceremonies expressing commitment generally take place in public and are relational events set within networks of friends and family, according to Smart (2007). Legal separation and divorce take place in private in a court room.

There are no communal rituals to support the people who are separating. Legal proceedings signify the official breakdown of a relationship. They necessitate talking about private troubles to strangers and the attendant upset that this may entail. They make separation a reality. There is no place within the legal process to deal with the emotional aspects of separating. Mediation is recommended as a support to the legal process but it too focuses solely on practical issues. Negotiating agreements assumes that the parties are able to communicate with each other. This was not the case in eleven of the fourteen cases presented in this dissertation. The emotional aspects got in the way.

Access to children, maintenance of dependents and division of the family home are the issues which are generally sorted out in a legal context (Coulter, 2008; Moore and Mahon, 2011). As Smart (2007) pointed out, the sorting out of things becomes a metaphor for the sorting out of past relations, meaning is ascribed to money and to family homes and these are linked to relationship issues during marriage. In this study, access to children was not decided by the courts as all of the children were teenagers and young adults. A consistent finding that emerged from the literature reviewed in Chapter 3 was that women are less well off financially following separation (Amato, 2000; Weston and Smyth, 2000; Uunk, 2004). A finding that is emerging from recent Irish studies on family law cases (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Coulter, 2008; Mahon and Moore, 2011) is that women and children generally stay in the family home and that very little maintenance is paid to women. As shown, all of these findings are replicated to some extent in this study.

The women are clearly less well off financially than if they had stayed married but the majority of them could not be described as being in poverty. These women are atypical of women in Ireland in that so many of them have professional qualifications and worked full time during their marriages. The women who gave up full-time work to care for their children are in a much more precarious financial position. They are struggling to find steady employment. They have expenses in maintaining family homes and in supporting young adults who are not yet fully financially independent. They are facing into retirement with no occupational pensions. For many of the women, decisions about

accommodation and finance are still pending and are an on going source of stress and uncertainty. It is difficult to 'move on' when legal proceedings take so many years to finalise.

As well as signifying loss, legal proceedings can also signify closure and planning for a new beginning. The focus under no-fault divorce is on future needs rather than on past misdemeanours. Avoidance of conflict and not apportioning blame make sense for the sake of the children but there seems to be very little space or place given to acknowledging the level of hurt and upset experienced by the adults. As mentioned, transition is a useful concept to use when examining separation, but focus on an end point should not dilute the level of upset that is felt during the process, as clearly described by the women in this study. As will be shown in the next section, while the women worried about their changing financial and housing situations, it was the losses, the shifts in identity, and the emotional aspects of separation that they found the most difficult.

### **Relationships Following Separation**

This section will consider data about women's relationships following separation. As mentioned already, women are often deeply embedded in their relationships with family and friends. The break up of a relationship constitutes a major event in their lives and has a knock-on effect on other relationships. This section will focus on exploring the fourth research question about how family practices and relationships are constituted after a marriage breaks down. It will utilise the concepts of connectedness and fragmentation to frame the discussion.

### **Contact With Ex Husband**

The language used in marriage ceremonies uses phrases like "two becoming one". The symbols used echo the same theme: individual candles are often used to light a single bigger candle. This section is concerned with what happens to the relationship between the couple when this unified 'candle' splits into two again. Carter and McGoldrick (2005) suggest that the emotional work of divorce entails the retrieval of self from the marriage and the construction by each partner of a different identity and different dreams for the future. One factor that

affects the shape of a family following separation is the extent to which a couple who have been married in excess of twenty years relate to each other following separation.

Most (9 out of 14) of the women have little or no contact with their husbands/ex-husbands. In the six cases of infidelity by the husband, there is almost (Catherine and Nora being the exceptions) no contact. Fischer *et al.* (2005) surveyed 1,791 Dutch people about contact with their ex-spouses following divorce. They found that almost half the couples still had some contact with their ex ten years after the divorce. The figure for contact in this study is less than the half found in the Dutch study. This is how one woman described setting the ground rules for contact with her husband;

Irene: You don't come near the house. If you pick the kids up you stay on the road, do not come to the door. I don't want any correspondence with you. If anything happens to any of the kids I will phone you or I'll text you or I'll email you. But unless it's something official I don't want anything to do with you. As far as I'm concerned, you have died.

In cases where husbands had met new partners following separation, there is also very little contact;

Frances: I haven't spoken to him since this time last year. I felt it wasn't my place to ring him.

L: So you don't have text contact, email contact?

Frances: Nothing. I might as well not exist.

L: And that's his..?

Frances: That's his wish because he's with somebody new.

The women who initiated separation hoped that their relationships with their husbands would be amicable and that they would be able to continue to attend family events together following separation but it did not always work out that way.

Eileen: At the moment, I really don't want to have anything to do with him but I was the one who said before "this has to be amicable because of the children and we're going to have celebrations etc, etc." At the moment, things are not great. I just can't do it. I need to be strong to meet him.

Lisa: I thought we would become civil, that was what I would have hoped for, that we could have been civil. He is still the broken-hearted man, two raw, that's what the girls say, too raw. This is what he says. He plays the victim, big time, and that upset me at the beginning.

Having to make arrangements about access for younger children is usually the focus of contact between parents following separation (Silva and Smart, 1999; Mahon and Moore, 2011). As mentioned, most of the women in this study had older teenagers or young adults at the time of their separations so the children could make their own arrangements to see their fathers. Fathers could contact their children directly on the children's mobile phones. They could make arrangements to meet in neutral venues without the mothers having to get involved.

Irene: Occasionally he met them but there was no real planning. Now I didn't say anything about it. They're adults. I was having to stand by.

Even for the women who had some contact with their ex-husbands, the encounters were described as being upsetting.

He finds it very distressing meeting me (Kay).

I meet him occasionally but find it very upsetting (Nora).

He is nicer to me now but I'm not relaxed in his company (Deidre).

The passage of time was mentioned as a factor that affected how some of the women felt about contact with their ex.

L: How much contact do you have now?

Catherine: That's shifted and changed over the year. In the beginning I couldn't see him at all. I just couldn't see him. I was too hurt and then, I don't know at what stage, I saw him every so often. We'd go for a walk or we'd go for a meal but it was aimless because it was just being cast adrift from this man I was married to. You know you can't talk about tomorrow.

The reality of the women's lives following separation was that most (9) of them had no contact with their ex-husbands and it was easier for them, for a variety of reasons, to live without contact. Yet they felt blamed for taking this position and that somehow they were not 'doing separation' in the correct fashion if they were not communicating with their children's father. They felt that there were cultural norms developing about the 'correct' way to do separation. The 'book' which Helen refers to below on how to do separation properly is still in the process of being written.

Helen: I'm not doing it right. I'm doing it completely against the book. I had a bit of a barney with someone recently, she turned and threw back at me "well, you're doing it all wrong".

Smart (1999) talks about how "the rise of mediation and the demise of the emphasis on fault show a trend towards governing divorce in a manner that minimises conflict-for the sake of the children" (Smart, 1999: 12). The Irish Family Mediation Service ([www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie)) also "encourages the separating couple to co-operate with each other in working out mutually acceptable arrangements". The message coming through is that couples should be able to communicate with each other following separation. As Helen put it;

Helen: If we were able to communicate, our marriages would not have broken down. The assumption always is (and if you hear people on the radio, the likes of Pat Kenny, I could throw a brick at the radio) that

parents should talk to each other and work it out. Your marriage breaks up because you are not getting on so that doesn't work.

Moore (2010) echoes the point Helen is making. Moore found that patterns established during marriages carried over into post-separation practices and relationships. For the women in this study who had no contact with their ex-husbands, the sense of failure was increased by their inability to comply with the expectation of having a harmonious divorce. Not only had they failed in their marriages but now they were failing in their separations.

### **Post-Separation Parenting-Connectedness to Children**

The vast majority of the mothers in the sample continued to have close relationships with their children following separation. Some would say that the relationships had become even closer in the absence of the fathers. The mothers talked about there being less tension in the house and that they no longer had to mediate between their husbands and their children. As mentioned already, most of the children stayed in the family home with their mothers following separation. Those who were at an age to have left home, continued to return to be with their mothers for holidays and to celebrate family events. The women, largely, retained their identity as mothers.

Eileen and Lisa, who left their homes, had the greatest difficulty in their subsequent relationships with their children. While the mothers were upset by their children's anger at them for leaving, they also understood it and felt that their children just needed time to come to terms with their reasons for leaving.

L: Were you taken aback then by your children's negative reaction?

Eileen: Yes, when I moved I thought they would be coming and staying with me for holidays. I didn't see the implications of "I don't want to talk to you". They were talking to their Dad. He was always the victim so they heard what he was feeling. He was the victim, he had been damaged and they were supporting him. I found that very hard.

Lisa talked about how guilty she felt about putting her children in the position where they had to figure out how much time to spend with each parent and which house was their home.

Lisa: I'm very concerned about the damage it did to the kids, and I'm feeling more sorry about that now and I'm feeling guilty. I'm sorry that I had to put them through that. I don't like the fact that they now have to choose, when they come back from holidays, which house do they go to first, and Easter, where do they go. I don't like the fact that they have to choose that.

In the other two cases where the women left home, the daughters went with the mothers and the sons (who were older) stayed with the fathers.

In four of the fourteen families, some or all of the children have refused to have anything to do with their fathers. These would be termed "excluded fathers" according to Moore's typology (2010: 264), except that in these cases it was not the mother who had closed the 'gate' on the father, it was the children. Moore's thesis that contact following separation depends on the quality of the relationships between fathers and their children before separation is also not entirely borne out. As the following quotations will demonstrate, some of the children who refused contact with their fathers were children whose relationships with their fathers had been extremely close prior to separation. The mothers recounted incidents in which the children felt let down by their fathers.

Geraldine: My oldest son who was the best friend of his father, adored his father, can't stand him now. He doesn't want to have anything to do with him. He is just excluded. He can have the hump all he likes about being excluded but that's the way it is. The other two are different. They still see him and they still have regular contact.

Again in Helen's case the youngest of the three girls was the only one who would see her father.

Helen: She sees him for an hour every three weeks or once a month, that's all. She said she sees him because she feels sorry for him because nobody else will see him.

In other cases (Frances, Irene and Kay) it is not that the children have refused contact but that their fathers have been very poor at continuing to make arrangements to meet them and the mothers are no longer prepared to do the work of mediating between their children and their fathers. Moore (2010) refers to "contact sliding into absence" (p. 288).

In some cases the children are happy to meet their father but do not want to meet his new partner.

Irene: The kids said "no. I'm not going to meet you over there. I don't want to go there anymore" because he never was true to his word, she would always turn up at some stage of the evening. So they were uncomfortable with it, so that has stopped.

Geraldine: There was a row about meeting up. When the two lads said to him "sorry, don't want to meet her.

Because most of the children were adults when their parents separated, they could make their own decisions about how much contact they wanted to maintain with their parents. Many of the children had left home and would have had very different levels of contact with parents than if they were younger. Apart from Eileen, all of the mothers in the study felt they had maintained close relationships with their children following separation. As mentioned, the situation with the fathers was somewhat different. Eight out of a total of thirty-five children opted to have nothing to do with their fathers. In situations where the fathers had new partners or had moved away, the children had only sporadic contact. Only one couple (Mary) came close to having an egalitarian post-separation parenting style. This was the couple who had the youngest child in the study and who had lived abroad and attended counselling prior to separating. The other couples

ranged along Moore's (2010: 4) typology from "involved but constrained", "involved but stressed", "aggrieved parents" to "excluded fathers".

Recent Irish research (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Timonen *et al.*, 2009; Mahon and Moore, 2011) has tended to focus on the needs of younger children whose parents separate than on the age group of young adults described by the mothers in this study. How their children reacted to their separations clearly had an impact on how the women coped. The mothers told stories of children failing exams, dropping out of college, getting anorexia, going binge drinking and generally being very upset about their parents' separation. The children's upset clearly added to the women's upset. The women were at pains to point out that just because their children were older, it did not mean that parental separation did not hurt them. How adult children in Ireland react to parental separation could be the subject of a different piece of research.

### **Renegotiating the 'Doing' of Family Events**

Much of family life, memories of childhood and stories that form family history are structured around sharing and celebrating family events. "Family rituals are central to the socialisation provided by the family, nurturing a sense of family identity and belonging and providing meaning to family interactions (deRoiste, 2006:14). When a marriage breaks down the structure of the family changes and arranging these events can become more complicated. In only three of the fourteen families did both parents celebrate events like Christmas, 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays, graduations, weddings or the birth of grandchildren together. In most cases, it was the fathers who were either not invited or who declined to attend.

Helen: He's been at nothing. We have a debs coming up in a few weeks for the girl he sees but there is not a mention of him coming. We've had two graduations, an entrance scholarship to University and two debs without him. On a selfish point, I don't mind now because I don't have to look at him.

Jane has a daughter getting married.

She's getting married this New Year's Eve. I love her to bits, but why this year? I have no money. I can't even think of it.

L: How are you going to manage the wedding? Will her father be invited?

J: No, no, no, and that's her choice. There's no relationship.

Even where fathers did attend, celebrations were tinged with sadness.

Catherine: I just dreaded the wedding but it was a wonderful day. I came back here with my brother and his wife and G came back here just to collect the keys of his car. When he left my sister-in-law just broke down and sobbed and sobbed and sobbed and I sobbed as well. My brother said "I can't help you, ladies." Then later on, about four in the morning, my brother started crying because G was like his brother.

Eileen, who had initiated separation, was invited back home for Christmas but found it extremely difficult walking away on her own afterwards and feels she will never go back again for Christmas.

Eileen: My children wanted me to go back for Christmas. The most difficult thing I had to do when I was finished talking to them was I walked out the door and down the drive on my own and got into my car. That was so awful because they were up there with their father and I was walking away on my own.

Kay: Christmas is very, very difficult, very difficult and the first Christmas awful, I ended up bawling crying at the table.

L: Did you invite him?

Kay: I didn't, I purposely, - and I even told him he wasn't welcome, because I think he was expecting to be invited, and I said no. Because I had this thing that there is no point pretending, if it's not there it's not there, and maybe that was wrong.

Family events not only involve happy events but also events where families come together as a unit to support each other at times of sickness or death. Several of the women discussed what they felt their response would be if their ex became ill and needed care in the future. Deidre's husband has been diagnosed with a serious illness. This was her response:

Deidre: My first reaction was "thank God this happened after we separated and not before" because I could never have gone through with the separation...R came home and said "Who's going to look after Dad?" I was very taken aback by this and I felt he was implying "what are you going to do about that?" I just said that of course I wouldn't see him stuck but that there was no way that he would be coming back to live here. I said he's got three sisters and two brothers.

Deidre was identifying that her obligation to care for her ex-husband had shifted since their separation and that the responsibility now shifted back to his family of origin. This one of the freedoms that Bateson (2000) identifies can result from a major change in a life trajectory. According to Bateson (2000: 53/54), "[e]very shift in the shape of lives proposes new understandings of freedom and shifts in the intersecting geometries of obligation and dependency". Separated spouses are freed from the obligation to care for each other and for each other's families. In this context, Deidre also mentioned that she often thought about how she felt she would behave at his funeral.

Deidre: Sometimes I imagine at his funeral (I know I shouldn't) which seat will I be in? Those things all go through your head.

L: Do you imagine yourself at the top of the church as the chief mourner or hiding discreetly at the back of the church?

D: At the back of the church is where I would like to be but I feel it would be such a difficult time for R and G that my place would be with them and that would put me at the top of the church. It's just one more of those rounds.

Other women also said they had given consideration to how they would behave at their mother-in-law's funeral.

L: This might sound like a mad question, do you ever visualise his funeral and where you would stand in the church?

Jane: No, but I visualise his mother's, it's in my head the whole time.

L: And where are you going to be? How are you going to react?

Jane: I'm not going to be there. I'm not going to be there, and I've asked my girls "if Nanny dies that's yer choice lads. You're adults, that's yer choice.

Jane was stating that she no longer belonged to her husband's family. She was no longer one of them. She was reconfiguring her family to just include her children and her own family of origin.

That only three of fourteen families shared celebrations together makes sense in the context of relations having broken down to the extent that they have in the families in this study. However, it does not comply with the ideal of 'harmonious' divorce espoused in current discourse. If conflict is seen as the aspect that causes the most harm in the separation process (Smart, 1999), then the ideal alternative being presented is that people should separate without conflict and should reconstitute their relationships in a harmonious manner.

Harmony does not seem to be happening for the vast majority of women in this study. It may be significant that Moore (2010) found that the couples she described as "egalitarians" following separation tended to be in the younger age group. There may be a generational factor at play here. As Bateson (1989) says "[e]vents look different from the vantage point of different dates of birth" (p66). Fischer *et al.* (2005) found that people with liberal attitudes towards divorce were more likely to maintain contact with their ex-spouses and to believe that they could be friends following divorce than those with conservative views on separation. Embeddedness in traditional beliefs about lifelong marriage by the women in this study may be impacting on how relationships are constructed following separation.

Initiators had hoped that relationships could be amicable. They referred to non-initiators who were not prepared to be amicable as 'playing the victim'. It is impossible to predict if this pattern will continue into the future. Fischer *et al.* (2005) found in the Netherlands that antagonism faded over time and that contact depended on the relationships that had existed during marriage, the presence of a new partner and the presence of joint children. Fischer *et al.* (2005) also found that both friendly and antagonistic contact lessened with the passage of time. For the women in this study, it is impossible to predict whether relationships will become even more distant over time or whether time will heal some of the pain and family members will be able to attend family events together. Some of the women expressed a wish that relationships might become easier in time. Others felt that 'a line had been crossed' and the trust that had been betrayed would take a huge effort to rebuild. They could not envisage that the work, the love labour, required to rebuild trust would take place.

### **Connectedness with Kin - Fear of Stigma**

The women's families of origin were a major source of support for twelve of the fourteen women. The Timonen *et al.* (2009) study described grandparents in particular as "the lynchpin" (p. xiv) of a support system that helped their children and their grandchildren to cope following separation. This source of support was not available to many of the women who separated in midlife as their parents had already died or were very elderly. Some of the women said they were glad their parents had not lived to see them separate as it would have upset them so much. They drew strength from their memories of their deceased parents. Others described how their parents were upset and possibly ashamed but not a single parent turned against their child due to them becoming separated.

Deidre: My mother was very slow to tell her sisters and her family. At some level she was probably ashamed or whatever. When things were bad in my marriage and I went through the separation I went over to her every Sat. evening for years and years and years. It was a life line. She'd say "sit down there now and we'll have a cup of tea". She was a very wise and very talented woman. I was trying to spare her from too much

worry about me but I was able to tell her. Her death has affected me hugely.

L: Do you think that they were very embarrassed in their community?

Kay: I think they found it hard to tell people, yea. I know I was down at some family celebration shortly afterwards, and literally if I was in the kitchen, it was if I was contagious, nobody wanted to stay to be drawn into conversation, they all disappeared.

L: So nobody knew what to say

Kay: Nobody knew what to say. I can understand.

Deidre and Kay had originally come from rural areas where their parents still lived.

Geraldine's parents lived in an urban area but the reaction was similar.

Geraldine: They were devastated. My parents couldn't believe it. You see, I hid everything. I didn't say anything to anybody. They called it "my situation". They had very staunch Catholic views right up to a couple of years ago. Even when my divorce came up, which was only recently, I said it to them...and there was a deep intake of breath. Shock and horror, divorce is just so anti Catholic. I should stay alone and a spinster for the rest of my life. They are unbelievable. They kind of accept it more now. I suppose they see that the kids are fine. The house is still standing. I'm still standing.

The reactions of parents described above as being "devastated" and finding it "hard to tell" reflects an older generation's attitudes to separation, as described in Chapter 6. While the parents did not blame their children, the women felt that they were embarrassed by them separating and that their parents still acted as if there was a stigma attached to separating. As mentioned, some of the women said they worried that the stigma would attach to their children.

Sisters, rather than parents, emerged as the greatest source of support for most of the women. Many of them had confided in their sisters about how unhappy they

were in their marriages before there was even a question of them separating. A recurring theme in the transcripts is that they had told almost nobody about how deeply unhappy they were in their marriages so their separations came as a shock to some family members and friends alike.

Anne: So when I moved out, we were in the hotel and I had brilliant support from my sisters. I think she [one sister in particular] really felt “she’s out now and I’m not letting her go back”. My sister set me up with sheets and towels and delph and all of that and they were absolutely there for me.

Kay described her sisters coming every weekend on a rota basis from Cork to Dublin to make sure that she was not alone. Mary, who had lived outside the country for several years, found it hugely supportive to be back close to her family when she was going through her separation.

L: You were back in your home town but that could bring a negative in being ashamed.

Mary: Not in my family. There may be some people in the extended family who are judgemental (there’s no question about that) but they would never say it to my face. But not my immediate family, not my sisters, 100% they would be behind me, they would never think “oh you must have done something”, never. I feel that for people who don’t have a supportive family, I don’t know how they get through it. If I didn’t have my family I wouldn’t have been able to cope.

Geraldine and Nora described their parents and siblings as being helpful but only “up to a point”. Either they did not really understand how separating felt because they had not been through it themselves or they did not understand because the women in the study did not want to burden them and did not tell them the full extent of their upset.

Frances described a scenario in which her separation has never been discussed with her siblings.

L: How did your family, your brothers and sisters react?

Frances: No reaction. They never, ever spoke about it which I find incredible. I remember the night that I sold my house and separated at the same time. I remember texting my family at about two o'clock in the morning and saying "this has been one of the darkest days in my life". Never, not a word. I suppose they didn't know what to say.

Many Irish people do not know what to say when somebody separates because it is outside their range of experience. As discussed already, it would have been unusual until the 1990s for most people to have a family member or a friend who was separated. There is no culture of divorce here so there are no established conventions for how to react. People's unease is a symptom of how uncomfortable people still are about separation.

Relationships with their husbands' families were closely connected with relationships with ex-husbands. In cases where there was continued contact with husbands, there was also contact with his family. In cases where there was no relationship with the husband or between children and their father, there was no relationship with his family.

Jane: They distanced themselves, you know, and his mother actually, and I passed her last Tuesday night, I was going for a walk with my friend, she got out of a taxi and turned her whole body away from me.

Ireland is still a country in which family affiliation is very important (Inglis, 2003). If relationships with in-laws were good before separation, to lose them can be yet another significant loss, both for the woman and for her children.

### **Relationships in Work and in a Social Context**

As mentioned, only two of the women in the study were not in employment. While some found it difficult to cope with the pressures at work and needed to take some time off (Anne and Kay), most turned up every day and pasted on their 'coping masks'. Each of the women told their bosses at work about their

separations. All of them received understanding and supportive responses. The women who were teachers were very aware that being separated would have been considered something to be ashamed of in their profession in the past, as the case of Eileen Flynn in 1982, which was discussed in Chapter 2, illustrated.

L: How did your colleagues in work react?

Deidre: In the job I'm in there would have been a time when that would have been a huge scandal, you probably wouldn't say it. Our staff is a big staff and there was only one other girl on staff separated already. People were sympathetic.

The way most of the women handled the news of their separations in work was that they told their closest colleagues and asked them to tell the others, but also to say that they did not wish to discuss the details any further. They asked for privacy and their wishes seem to have been respected. This approach would seem to indicate that separation is still not an issue Irish people are comfortable discussing. Several of the women mentioned that their work colleagues had become some of their closest friends and were supportive both inside and outside of work. Work was an important aspect of the women's identity, as well as being a source of income. They were not about to lose that too.

The women talked about how important it is for women to keep their own friends and their own interests and not to be totally subsumed in their husband's social network.

Catherine: It was important for me to have had a life of my own because I had all that network and that level of independence I could fall back on. They were always there.

L: So while you were very much part of a couple since you were fifteen, you also had this other life?

Catherine: Yes, without a doubt, and I say to my daughter "hold onto your pals and keep those interests up".

All of the women had the experience that they lost some joint friends as a result of separation. If they lived in a small community, this made it difficult to socialise if they were not on speaking terms with their ex-husband

Kay: Socially, I've found it very hard. He was involved in sport.

I've lost all those friends, I know nobody. I keep saying that I used to get three hundred Christmas cards, and I don't get thirty now. I was just left. His job would be very sociable, and all our going out would have to do with that, and that's a big loss in my life, because I enjoyed, the whole social life that went with it. It's all a closed door to me now I feel, because it's a very small community really.

Some of the women described having to build their social lives almost from scratch after they separated. The way Breda put it was; "It wasn't so much that I lost friends, as that I removed myself". Breda went back to college and made an entire new circle of friends. Kay talks about how her friends are almost entirely female now.

I have a very small circle now and it's almost entirely female and that's a big lack. I really miss maleness.

Another difficulty the women mentioned was that their married friends were not available to socialise with at night time or to go away with on holidays because they were taken up with activities in their families. Some of the women said they disliked socialising with couples but that Ireland is still a very couples-oriented society. Women who are 'single again' have trouble socialising. They do not 'fit'. They tend to rely primarily on female friends and family members. Several of the women listed their sisters, in particular single sisters, as being the mainstay of their social lives.

L: Socially, how are you functioning?

Deidre: Very badly. It's my biggest problem at the moment, not having friends in the same situation. All my friends, people I work with, friends that I've had from school, are all still in their marriages. I mean I go out

with them still and I meet up with them but nobody else has time, that's one of the biggest problems. My sister, who is separated, we would have gone once or twice. But even just the other day I saw a lovely deal on the paper for two nights down the country but I was looking at it and said "I've nobody to go with". I find that very upsetting.

None of the women were in new relationships. Five stated that they still loved their husbands and were having a hard time letting that go. They identified that their emotions were ambiguous and contradictory. They loved their husbands but hated aspects of their behaviour. It was as if they still held onto a hope that the men would change and come to their senses one day. This made it very difficult for them to move on. Most of the women were scared of depending totally on a man again and said that they would never re-marry but would like to be involved in a relationship. The women were very conscious that their age was a barrier to their chances of meeting another man.

Mary: If you're over forty five, you're too old. I think it's because fifty plus year old men don't want a woman of that age. They want somebody who is in their thirties. So they (dating agencies) don't get enough demand for it so anybody over forty-five is basically screwed. There's no place to go out and meet men, other than maybe going into some seedy bar or something.

Fine Davis (2011) surveyed 1,404 people in Ireland and found that single women in their late thirties were having difficulty finding partners. Like the women in this study, they felt that Irish men wanted younger women. The situation in the States seems to be somewhat different. Brown and I-Fen Lin (2012) from Bowling Green State University presented a paper in April 2012 on "The Gray Revolution". They concluded that the rate of divorce among people in the over fifty age range in the U.S. has increased to such an extent that there should be lots of single-again older people available for dating. This situation does not appear to exist in Ireland currently. In fact, the opposite seems to be the case.

## **Discussion: Fragmentation and Connectedness in Relationships following Separation**

The data in this study shows that relationships between former spouses may be seriously fragmented as a result of separation in midlife. Very few couples managed to remain on friendly terms with each other. Relationships between fathers and some of the adult children were also seriously fragmented following separation because some children refused to have anything to do with their fathers. Some relationships with in-laws were lost. Some relationships with joint friends were lost. Social lives were disrupted. Some of the women felt they had to start from scratch to build their social lives as a result of separating.

Kalmijn (2010) found that while the barriers to divorce are stronger in countries where family is strong, that the support offered to their own members in the event of divorce is also stronger. The data in this study supports that conclusion. All of the women stayed connected to their families of origin. Almost all of the women continued to be closely connected to their children. Most of the women and children stayed in the same house. Sisters and friends emerged as the most important sources of support. The women mentioned how important it had been to have maintained their own friends and their own interests throughout their married lives. All of the women continued to work, as they had done before their separations.

The participants in Wineman's (1999) study in Chicago referred to the last stage in the divorce process as "when you least expect it". They were referring to the on-going sense of loss or unease they felt each time a family milestone was reached and each time a family gathered to celebrate or to mourn together. The women in this study had made a variety of different arrangements for such events. Some women invited fathers but felt sad and ill at ease in their presence. For others, there was no question that the men would be included, which also left the women feeling a sense of loss and regret for what might have been. The stage in the life cycle most of the families are at involves children graduating from school, from college, getting married and the parents becoming grandparents. This stage of the lifecycle may also involve grandparents becoming more dependent and dying. Family life goes on with everyday communication,

occasional attendance at family events and obligations to provide care to dependent members, but former spouses may no longer be considered to belong to the family. Different families adopt different practices and 'do' family in different ways following separation. This study has shown emphatically that there is not just 'one way' to 'do' separation.

### **Women's Identity Post-Separation**

The construction of individual identity develops through relationships with others. When a relationship breaks down, particularly a marital relationship that lasted in excess of twenty years, a major shift in identity may need to take place. The centrality of family identity for individual identity in an Irish context has already been discussed. Smart (2007) talks about the 'stickiness' of relationships with kin and how "[i]ndividual life trajectories are meaningful in the context of the other lives with whom they are linked" (p.44). The women described how their lives had been linked with other people's lives, namely their parents, their grandparents, their siblings, their children, their in-laws, their spouses and how their identity and their sense of themselves had been largely defined by these relationships. Having a secure sense of belonging and certainty about location and status can provide ontological security, but it can also be suffocating (Smart, 2007).

As mentioned, women who separate in midlife in Ireland are the first cohort of Irish women to separate in such large numbers at that stage of life. As such, they find themselves having to navigate a journey through unfamiliar territory and they know very few people who can show them the way (Bateson, 2000:93). The only lesson they are likely to have learned during their childhood in Ireland is that separation is bad and that it signifies failure. Gertina van Schalkwyk (2005), in her study of South African divorced women, found that the point at which the divorced women began to reconstruct their identities was the point at which they could attribute some positive meaning to their past and present experiences and move on from using a discourse of failure about themselves for being divorced. Most of the women in this study are at a point where they can attach some

positive meaning to their separation. For many of them the positive meaning has to do with finding themselves.

Anne: I've learned now that the most important relationship you have is with yourself and... inner peace within myself.

Jane: This has taught me, nobody knows what's going to happen tomorrow. What I've found I will never give up. Me. He might have his money and this girl he's with, but I have everything. Three beautiful daughters who love me to bits.

In the past, a married woman's entire identity and sense of self was defined by being a wife and mother (Bateson, 1989:75). Jane seems to be saying that her identity as a mother is more important than her identity as a wife.

Nora and Mary talk about how much they miss being part of a couple

Nora: I feel, I feel saddened by the fact that I thought now was our time in life: Now it was our time to go places. I miss his company. You miss being part of the couple. At the end of the day I have a pain in my heart. I have a hole in my heart. I just miss him, do you know. And I don't know will that eventually go away.

Mary: "I think that's the biggest thing, not having a companion, not having someone to talk to about everything that's going on and concerns about your daughter

Eileen, on the other hand, mentioned several times how lonely and invisible she felt during her marriage and that it took time for her to realise that she could be her own person.

Eileen: I couldn't believe how I had suddenly gone from being this invisible person to having a voice. Suddenly I had a voice. I'm back in a world of my own, doing my own thinking. I'm beginning to realise that I

am a person in my own right and that I'm not an appendage to everybody. I'm not an invisible person anymore. I'm me.

Geraldine seems to be at the point where she is comfortable with the status of being divorced and where she loves her new-found freedom but she acknowledges that it has taken her time to get to that point. New beginnings do not happen overnight (Bateson, 2000).

Geraldine: This whole separation is a journey and I have reached a stage in my journey that I am perfectly happy being single. I have no problem saying I'm divorced. It's not an issue for me. I'm much happier to be free, to be a free person, to be single. I really have found myself. I have found my wings at this stage. I am so happy about that. I love my freedom but it's not all a forward motion 'cos you get set backs and you go back.

Lisa is, likewise, much happier to be separated than she was in her marriage. She regrets that she is less well off financially than if she had stayed with her husband but she has no doubt that she is better off emotionally to have left.

Lisa: I don't like the fact that at my age, thinking of retirement in the next few years that I can't afford things but yet if I had to choose between before and now, now is much, much better!

L: You're in a better place

Lisa: Oh God! I'm in the sunshine. I don't have that pain. I cried it out four years before I left, or even longer. I cried it out. It [the separation] was just tying it off, but it had totally died.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) talk about marriage as a trap and a denial of individual freedom of choice. Seen from this perspective, separation would mean liberation and freedom. The quotations above from Lisa, Geraldine and Eileen agree with that sentiment. Breda was very conscious that women in previous generations would not have had a choice to leave their husbands and that by making that choice, by engaging in individualisation, she was standing up for

what she believed was her right, even though it involved a considerable amount of pain.

Breda: I think it's always good to have choice...and not to settle for second best...There is gain and pain. When your back is to the wall, the gain is to actively choose what you want to do. Having to push through your own fears is a gain. Sometimes it's hard to see if the gains balance the pain. My hope is that the gains will go up.

Frances also initiated separation but talks about how difficult she has found it and the devastating impact it has had on her. She also mentions feeling that very few people understand the pain involved because separated people hide their distress from almost everyone. They cope. They carry on. They distract themselves.

Frances: I kind of feel so shattered and battered and broken by it and nobody seems to notice because you can't go round with a long face on you. I suppose I distract myself but I know I'm distracting myself. I feel my heart is broken and that it can't be mended.

L: Is your self broken?

Frances: Yes and your confidence. I know that I'm still the same person but somehow or other it's left such a blow.

Several of the women (Catherine, Helen and Irene) talked about how they had survived the initial trauma of separating so suddenly and how they were adapting over time to the reality of being separated.

Catherine: And I am functioning. I'm functioning very well. I'm working, I've been on holidays. I really loved that. I know I can be okay but I'll only be okay.

Helen: You have to try and make the best of it. I'm coming through it now. I feel that I myself was kind of put down for so long, I was never taken seriously or never considered first... I think, you hit the wall loads

of times but you don't ever go back as far as you were...At the beginning I was terrified at the thought of being alone because the girls are moving on, that doesn't frighten me as much now.

Irene: I am very much trying to get my own life back together. Two years on from separation has been a time of, probably for me, acceptance. Although I am hurt and I feel I've the scars on my face to show my sadness. I think I have accepted it. I just need to move on in life... I'm a survivor definitely so I will survive.

Catherine, Eileen and Irene had not chosen to be separated but they have come to see the benefits of being their own person. It is as if individualisation has been forced upon them and they are figuring out how to do it and how to enjoy it. Bateson (1989) asserts that women spend their lives adapting to change and that "constancy is an illusion" (p.14). She points out that women spend their lives watching over the unfolding lives of their family and friends and that when things change, they have the strength to adapt and to imagine something new. "The central survival skill is the capacity to pay attention and respond to changing circumstances, to learn to adapt, to fit into new environments beyond the safety of the temple precincts" (p.231). Women who separate are beyond the safety of the temple precinct in the sense that they are alone facing into old age. Their prospects are both more open and less protected than before (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Following separation, they may have greater freedom to be their own person but they may also be more vulnerable in that they no longer have the protection of their husband or his extended family, assuming the protection was there in the first place. Several of the women mentioned their fears about the future and growing old alone.

Mary: The thing I worry about is when my daughter moves on and I am living on my own in some small apartment that I'll become like some crazy old bag lady.

Bateson (2000) would contend that these women need to re-imagine their futures as a period of new beginnings rather than just as a period before old age.

“Through most of human history, adult work, marriage and child bearing meant that the dye was cast and fresh starts were a very rare luxury” (p.102). Now, however, adulthood has become a longer period. It has more chapters than previously and separation can be just one more chapter.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter dealt with the events and processes that occurred during and after the women’s separations. It examined the events that precipitated separation and concluded that this was an incredibly stressful period for all concerned. The women used the language of loss and trauma when describing the events that unfolded around the time of moving out. Six of the women identified themselves as the initiators of the separations. Another six stated that discovering infidelity was what led to their separations. Those who initiated separation did so for a variety of different reasons, mainly to do with not feeling loved. The initiators had been thinking about separating for years but it came as a total shock to those who were non-initiators. All of the women stated that they felt both pain and shame during the process of separation. The pain was related to the sense of loss they felt, mainly for their intact family. The shame was related to their sense of failure to succeed in their relationships.

Various aspects of embeddedness in societal patterns appear to be emerging. The women who initiated separation delayed until midlife because separating entailed doing the opposite of what they had grown up to believe was right. The men who were about to be left may similarly have been embedded in a belief that separation could not happen to them. The gap between the marriage partners makes it look as if men and women still lived in different spheres, men in a public sphere and women in a private sphere, and that they could not bridge their different perspectives and ways of relating. Hangovers from times past seemed to be still at play.

Material on the legal, housing and financial arrangements that were made between the spouses following separation was examined. All of the women are worse off financially than if they had stayed living with their husbands. Those

who did not work full time during their marriages are in the most insecure financial position. The women received very little maintenance because most of their children were in their late teens when they separated. While the women bemoaned the fact that they were less well off than they should have been at this stage of their lives, for ten of the fourteen women in this study, money was not a major problem.

Nine of the women remained in their family homes. For most, this was a source of comfort and stability. The women worried initially about house maintenance tasks but they managed to source help and it was no longer an issue. Almost all of the women maintained very close relationships with their children. Several of the children refused to have any contact with their fathers. The more common pattern was that children had sporadic contact, sometimes associated with their own perceptions of familial obligation. In some situations there were problems between the children and their fathers' new partners. Very few of the women maintained amicable relationships with their former spouses. Relationships with in-laws were also lost in most cases. Relationships with families of origin remained strong. Sisters emerged as the main source of support. Being in employment was also a source of support and stability. By exploring the relationships that women describe following separation, a picture of how they define themselves emerges. The women clearly still define themselves in terms of connectedness to the relationships that continue to matter to them.

However, many of the women were struggling socially. They lost joint friends and some of them had not been able to build a new social life. They no longer 'fitted' into the Irish social scene which they felt was dominated by couples. None of the women were in new relationships and felt it was almost impossible at their age to meet a man. In view of the recent Census figures (CSO, 2012 Appendix 4) which show that separated women outnumber single women in the fifty plus age bracket, the women and the leisure industry may need to adjust their thinking about how few separated women there are in Ireland.

As detailed above, the women experienced various losses and gains during their journeys through separation. Many of their relationships were reconfigured

following separation. They remained connected to their children and to their own family and friends but they disconnected from their former spouses and from many of the relationships which had been part of their married lives. They had to construct new identities for themselves which involved losing their married status and embracing a 'single again' status.

Many of the women questioned the current expectation that separations should be harmonious. It was not that they were bitter or wanted to keep a conflict going but they felt that to expect harmony to quickly follow acrimony was not to fully understand the enormity of the hurt caused by separation. The women's concluding comments are about survival and resilience in the face of adversity. The women range along a continuum from those who have integrated being separated into a positive sense of themselves to those who can only see the negatives and the losses involved in separating and who are still very upset.

## **CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION**

### **Introduction**

This dissertation set out to examine the experience of Irish women who separate in midlife. This was achieved by reviewing national and international literature on separation and divorce, as well as by conducting interviews with fourteen women who were separated. The theoretical framework for the study entailed using the concepts of embeddedness, love labour, transition, identity and individualisation within an overall framework of connectedness and fragmentation in order to analyse the data about the women's experiences of separation. Conclusions were drawn and presented at the end of each chapter. This chapter will draw the conclusions together and will be structured around answering each of the research questions. It will summarise what the literature had to contribute towards answering the questions and how the theoretical concepts helped to guide the analysis of the data. It will also outline what my conclusions are, based on the literature, the data and the theoretical concepts used in the study.

The questions the research set out to answer are stated again as follows:

1. In what ways do family and cultural attitudes to marital breakdown influence how women in midlife experience separation in Ireland?
2. What are the key contributory processes and events that lead to separation in midlife?
3. What losses and gains are experienced by women as part of the transition through separation?
4. In what ways are relationships and family practices reconstructed following separation?
5. Do the experiences of women following separation make sense when viewed through the lenses of connectedness and fragmentation?

## **1. Impact of Family and Cultural Attitudes to Separation**

The literature reviewed (Inglis, 1998; O'Connor, 1998; Clear, 2001; Hill, 2003) shows clearly that marriage and family were seen as being central to women's lives in Ireland when the women in this study were growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. The women's accounts of their childhood years demonstrate that Catholic teaching on marriage as a lifelong commitment was dominant in the patriarchal familist ideology about marriage and separation at that time. All of the women stated emphatically that separation was unthinkable for anyone in their families when they were growing up. They understood clearly as children that to separate would be to bring shame on themselves and on their family name. They could see that stigma attached to being from a 'broken home'. They also understood, even as children, that some people were unhappy in their marriages but the message they received from their parents was that it was not acceptable, except possibly in very extreme circumstances, to leave a marriage. They understood that family came first and self came second and that it was a woman's responsibility to do all in her power to ensure that families remained intact. This is similar to what had been presented in the literature referred to above.

Attitudes to marriage and separation shifted somewhat in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s, culminating in the passing of divorce legislation in 1997 (Burley and Regan, 2002; Hill, 2003). The passing of this legislation signalled an acknowledgment of the reality of marriage breakdown and an acceptance that individuals had the right to leave a marriage and to be free to re-marry. However, a sizeable minority of the Irish population voted against divorce. Residues of traditional beliefs about marriage and the dangers of separation remained firmly in the consciousness of families and of communities throughout Ireland.

The influence of traditional attitudes to separation can be seen in the fourteen women's accounts of their experiences of separation. The women who initiated separation delayed the decision to separate for years, decades in some cases, partly because they had internalised a belief that separation was wrong and because they prioritised their children's needs over their own needs. Despite being extremely unhappy, they felt for years that they did not have sufficient

grounds to end their marriages. They felt that a stigma still attached to separation and that their children would be hurt and shamed by being from a 'broken home'. They felt their parents would be upset. They had been brought up on messages about prioritising family needs over individual needs and found it very difficult to behave in a way that went against those beliefs. It went 'against the grain' for them to prioritise their own needs and to make the decision to separate. They were embedded in 'traditional' beliefs rather than pursuing an individualised project of the self (Giddens, 1992).

Embeddedness in traditional beliefs about lifelong marriage impacted in many of the same ways on the women who had not initiated separation. These women also talked about feeling guilty about having failed to save their marriages. They blamed themselves for failing to pick a man who would be faithful. They blamed themselves for failing to keep their husbands sufficiently happy. They blamed themselves for letting their children down by failing to maintain an 'intact' family. They felt like failures because they were the first ones in their families or in their group of friends to separate. The only language they used in the initial stage of separating was the language of failure and betrayal.

The sentiments about personal failure resonate with Bateson (2000), van Schalkwyk (2005) and Gregson and Caynor (2009), who all talk about how women blame themselves when their marriages end in separation. Van Schalkwyk contended that in a country like South Africa where being a separated woman was not the norm that women struggled to arrive at a positive meaning of their separations even more than in countries where separation was more accepted and more common. The language and discourse in relation to separation the women in this Irish study used was the language they had grown up with, remnants of which surfaced when they themselves were the ones separating. The first set of beliefs about separation they had to confront and challenge were their own beliefs. This point will be expanded upon further at the end of this section.

As discussed already, the age group of women in this study were born into a society in which Catholic patriarchal familist ideology was dominant but they also lived through a period of significant economic and social change in the

1980s, 1990s and 2000s in Ireland, during which attitudes towards women, contraception, equality, religion, unmarried parenthood, cohabitation and separation shifted towards more liberal agendas (Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2004; Inglis, 2007; Lunn *et al.*, 2009). The women availed of increased opportunities for secondary and third level education. They limited the size of their families. Two thirds of them worked full-time throughout their marriages. Those who initiated separation had the courage to be among the first cohorts of Irish women aged over forty, to openly make a decision to separate. Those who did not initiate separation accepted the reality of their situations and were able, after varying periods of time, to begin to re-construct their lives.

All of the women felt pain and regret that their marriages had ended and, as discussed above, many also felt ashamed and guilty. Many of the women retained elements of older belief systems about the ideal of lifelong marriage and struggled to replace a discourse of failure in relation to separation with a more positive meaning of the place of separation in their lives. It should not come as a surprise that women who were raised with traditional views of separation, women who lived through the debates surrounding the two referenda on divorce, women who witnessed how females who contravened norms about marriage (for example, Eileen Flynn and Joanne Hayes) were treated, would not be effected by those experiences. The combination of continuity with past belief systems and change towards the integration of newer, more liberal perspectives is a common theme in literature on social change in Ireland (Hill, 2003; Ferriter, 2004; Inglis, 2007). The dominant view of separation as being entirely negative may have shifted, but residual elements of that negative perspective remain which impact on the way in which Irish women who separate in midlife experience separation.

Even though divorce has been legal in Ireland now for over fifteen years and the numbers separating and divorcing have continued to increase (CSO, 2012), for the women who participated in this study, separation was far from a normative experience. As mentioned, they are among the first generation of Irish women to openly initiate separation. They are the first women to have to openly accept and acknowledge that their marriages had broken down. Being the first to experience anything, being at the margins of social change, always involves what Bateson

(2000) refers to as the “ripples of turbulence” (p.93). The women had few role models amongst their families or their friends to show them how to ‘do’ separation. The women lived in ‘respectable’ families in which separation was not ‘supposed’ to happen. It is not necessarily that they have been made to feel like failures or are stigmatised by their family and friends but that the sense of shame is internalised within the women themselves. As mentioned, the first beliefs they have to deal with in trying to make sense of separation are their own beliefs. People may have liberal views about individuals’ rights to separate, but it is another matter when the person separating is themselves. In order to cope, the women need to change their own construction of separation from the negative view they had grown up with to a more positive construction which they can integrate into their lives for the future.

## **2. Processes and Events that lead to Separation in Midlife**

Factors which were found in the literature to relate specifically to separation in midlife have to do with couples delaying the decision to separate until their children are raised, couples being better able to afford to separate at that stage of life (Montenegro *et al.* 2004) and to people going through what is commonly referred to as a ‘midlife crisis’ (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Carter and McGoldrick, 2005). Midlife crisis refers to people, often in their forties becoming aware of their mortality and of their diminishing physical abilities and, in situations where they are unhappy, deciding to make changes before it is too late. Other contributory factors to separation in midlife found in the literature are largely similar to those found at any age. Common processes that lead to separation at any age include infidelity, breakdown in communication, lack of involvement in the home, problems with alcohol abuse and domestic violence (Amato, 2000; O’Connor, 2001; McKeown *et al.*, 2002). As mentioned already, factors that contribute to marital breakdown tend to be located and discussed at three levels; at a societal level, at an interpersonal level and at an individual personality level. The individual level is beyond the scope of this study, although it is acknowledged that individual personality issues formed a part of some of the women’s stories about why they felt their marriages had broken down.

The changes in society which were identified as destabilising marriage were secularisation and individualisation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992), changing gender roles and women's economic independence (Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; Lowenstein, 2004), as well as the removal of barriers to separation by the legalisation and normalisation of divorce (Dronkers *et al.*, 2006). Secularisation results in marriage being seen as a civil contract which can be broken rather than as a religious contract, involving God at its centre, which cannot be broken. Individualisation involves putting individual needs before family obligations and having higher expectations of fulfilment within marriage. Changes in the social construction of gender roles can lead to problems within marriage if there is a mismatch of expectations between the spouses (Kiely, 1998; McDonnell, 1999). Women's economic independence simply means that women who are in employment can afford to leave a marriage if they are unhappy, whereas when women were engaged full-time in the home they had access to fewer resources and might not have been able to support themselves if they separated. According to Dronkers *et al.* (2006), the argument about divorce rates having increased because the legal and attitudinal barriers to divorce have decreased is not borne out by the evidence. Their contention is that more liberal divorce legislation reflects the reality of the increase in the rates of marital breakdown rather than being the cause of the increase.

Worries about separation entailing the breaking of a religious contract played only a small part in the discussions with the participants about the processes that led to, or delayed, their marriages breaking down. Religion was still very important to a few of the women but they did not see a conflict between planning to get divorced and their beliefs as practising Catholics. While all of the women had been raised as Catholics, by the time the interviews took place, the majority of them stated that they were no longer practising Catholics. They took their marriage vows seriously and hoped that their marriages would last a life time but religion did not play a big part in their decision-making about separating. They also stated that divorce being legalised and separation becoming more socially acceptable were *not* key factors in decisions about whether to separate or to stay together.

When writing about the individualisation thesis, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) stated that women used to abandon their dreams when they got married but that, in more recent times, women hold onto their dreams and abandon their marriages. The suggestion is that women have higher expectations of relationships and, if these expectations are not fulfilled, they leave their marriages and search for fulfilment in another relationship. This sentiment was not borne out by the vast majority of the women who initiated separation in this study. Individualisation or going through a midlife crisis or being financially secure were not their motivations for separation. For most, maintenance of physical and mental health was the motivation for initiating separation identified in this study. Most of the women separated in order to survive. They feared that their physical and mental health would deteriorate if they continued to live with the level of unhappiness they felt within their marriages. Their decision to end their marriages was motivated by a need to survive at a much more basic level than by a desire for self-actualisation or individualisation. They battled with the decision for years and only went through with the separation when they felt their relationships were beyond repair. A desire for individual freedom and fulfilment was not the reason for separating as individualisation theorists would suggest.

At the level of interpersonal relationships, the literature shows that women tend to put the emphasis for their marriages breaking down on relational issues (McDonnell, 1999; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999; O'Connor, 2001; Amato and Previti, 2003; McKeown *et al.*, 2004). The women in this study replicated that finding and recounted stories about relationship difficulties which had been building for years. They talked about unresolved problems with the transition to parenthood, problems with sharing childcare and household tasks, differences over money and sex, difficulties with resolving conflict, a demand-withdrawal cycle which was repeated for years, a lack of emotional reciprocity, problems with communication and an absence of support during times of crisis as all being factors which contributed to their eventual separations.

The common theme running through all of the women's stories was the theme of not feeling loved. The concept of love labour (Lynch, 2007) was felt to best capture what the women were saying about the range of emotional, physical and

mental processes they felt led to their marriages breaking down. The women talked about the work needed to sustain love in their relationships with their husbands not being done. They described emotional distance between themselves and their husbands which they were unable to bridge. Some of them referred to a mismatch in expectations about gender roles and an inability to resolve this issue. The hurt they felt was connected to not feeling valued, not being seen and the labour needed to sustain love not being maintained over the long term. The women who initiated separation did not feel loved because of ways in which their husbands failed to do the work of love labour. The women whose husbands committed adultery also felt betrayed and rejected, as well as feeling unloved.

It is clear from the stories the women told that some of their relationships had broken down long before separation actually took place, although this may have been news to their husbands. Other relationships, from the women's perspective at any rate, were still 'good enough' up to the point at which they learned that their husbands were having affairs. The suddenness with which separation was triggered is worthy of note and may explain some of the pain and trauma felt during the separation process. As discussed, the women who initiated separation blurted it out without any warning. Some of the men who disclosed having affairs only told their wives on the day they were planning to move in with their girlfriends.

It is not clear from the data why there was such gulf in perception between the men and the women about their respective levels of unhappiness within their marriages. Part of the explanation may be that men and women who are now in midlife were socialised to live in different spheres, a private sphere for the women and a public sphere for the men, and that, even though many of the women had entered the public sphere by being engaged in paid employment, a gap still existed between men and women in this age group about their respective roles within the private sphere of marriage. Some of the men were clearly embedded in traditional gender roles and only occasionally helped with childcare and household tasks. Where the women expected these jobs to be shared, since they were also going out to work, there were problems, but this was not the case with most of the couples.

Embeddedness in traditional roles seems to have manifested itself more in the couples' inability to communicate about difficult emotional issues rather than in the doing or not doing of specific jobs. Some of the women blamed themselves for not being assertive enough and for going silent rather than risk causing a row. They identified that this related back to how they had been raised as girls. They also suggested that their husbands' inability to discuss how they felt about their marriages also linked back to how the men had been raised as boys. Most of the men refused to go to marriage counselling until they finally understood that their wives were leaving them, by which time it was too late. It was just not done in their generation to discuss deeply emotional matters with anyone. They simply did not have the words. This inability by both parties to communicate honestly and at a deep level resulted in huge gaps in understanding between spouses which eventually led to their separations.

As discussed already, marriages break down in midlife for the same reason that they break down at any age, namely, because one of the partners in the marriage does not feel loved. Feeling loved, in this context, does not just refer to romantic love. It refers to feeling that the work needed to sustain love, love labour, is not being done. The person who does not feel loved withdraws in order to protect themselves from further hurt, as in the case of the women who initiated separation, or goes in search of love elsewhere, as in the case of the men who had affairs. The women who initiated separation did not feel loved but they did not separate in order to find love with another man. They separated in order to save themselves from the mental anguish of living in a marriage in which they were desperately unhappy. (Two of those who initiated separation did so despite the fact that they had no means to support themselves.) The six women whose husbands had affairs were left not knowing exactly why their husbands did not feel loved but surmising that, for whatever reason, this must have been the case. They could track patterns in their relationships which could have contributed to their husbands feeling that their wives no longer loved them but, in the absence of interviews with the husbands, it is not possible to say with any certainty why the men ended their marriages in the way they did.

### **3. Losses and Gains**

The concepts of loss and gain are included in the transitions framework which is the framework commonly used in literature to analyse separation (McDaniel and Coleman, 2003; Ahrons, 2005; Sakraida, 2005). As quoted already, Ahrons describes transitions as “turning points, uncomfortable periods that mark the beginning of something new while signifying the ending of something familiar” (Ahrons, 2005:384). ‘Uncomfortable periods’ and ‘the ending of something familiar’ were not felt to adequately capture the sense of loss described by the women in this study. Practitioners in this area tend to use the concept of loss and the associated theories about the processes of grief and mourning in their work with people who are/have separated (Bogolub, 1991; Fisher and Alberti, 2006; O’Hara, 2011). It was, therefore, felt to be important to highlight the concept of loss, rather than just referring to it as just being part of the process of transition.

The literature reviewed shows that separation entails coming to terms with a whole series of losses (Ahrons, 2005; Fisher and Alberti, 2006; O’Hara, 2011). The women in this study mentioned the loss of identity as part of a couple, loss of an intact family, loss of a familiar routine, loss of joint friends, loss of a lifestyle, loss of a shared future, loss of a secure income, possibly the loss of a family home and, in general, the loss of self esteem. They had been married for between twenty and thirty-five years. Separation entailed losing much of what had been familiar to them for more than half of their lives. Some of the losses listed relate to the loss of concrete objects such as money and a house. Other losses are more of an emotional or social nature. Findings relating to income and accommodation will be dealt with first.

A consistent finding in the literature reviewed is that women are less well off financially as a result of separation (Amato, 2000; Weston and Smyth, 2000; Uunk, 2004). Women in their forties and fifties who have been out of the workforce for extended periods due to child-minding responsibilities often find it difficult to find work, partly because their skills may be out-of date. Women who are older also have fewer years in which to save towards retirement and many

have inadequate pension provision due to having fragmented employment histories (Weston and Smyth, 2000).

Many of the findings from the literature about the financial situation of women following separation are replicated in this study, particularly in the case of the women who gave up full-time work to care for their children. These women are struggling to find employment and are facing into retirement with no occupational pensions. While some maintenance arrangements were made for dependent children, almost no maintenance was provided for these women. Their situations are similar to those found in studies of recent Irish family law cases by Coulter (2008) and Mahon and Moore (2011). The emphasis in the Courts seems to be on future needs rather than on taking past caring roles or opportunities to work outside the home into account. This emphasis leaves women who have stayed home to mind their children very vulnerable in the event of separation. The presumption that women who are in midlife can find employment and provide for themselves does not take into account their contribution to the accumulation of family resources in the past or the barriers they may face in returning to the workforce in the future. (One of the women described how there was not even a computer in the bank when she left to take care of her children.)

However, the majority of the women interviewed for this study, nine out of fourteen, have professional qualifications and worked full-time during their marriages. In this respect they are atypical of many women their age in Ireland. As mentioned, the sample is largely a middle class sample. The women are all less well off financially than if they had stayed married but could not be described as being in poverty. Those who had to buy their husbands out of their family homes will have mortgages until they are seventy. They will not be able to afford to take early retirement and, at a time of their lives when they thought they would be financially secure, their standard of living has been significantly diminished.

In terms of accommodation following separation, nine of the fourteen women remained in the same family homes with their children. This, again, is typical of arrangements found in other Irish studies (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Coulter, 2008;

Mahon and Moore, 2011). Some of the women mentioned that being left in the family home was a 'mixed blessing'. They referred to the expenses involved in maintaining older houses. Some of them were still providing for young adults who returned home intermittently and were not fully financially independent. However, for most of the women, being able to stay in their family homes and continuing to provide a home base for their children was something they valued. The Courts may have seen their home as an asset which could be sold but the women saw it as providing stability and continuity for themselves and their children at a time of upheaval in their lives. Their homes represented security at a time of insecurity. Relationships with neighbours were a source of support for many of the women. It was important to them that their children's friends could still continue to call. To lose their homes would have been to lose an important aspect of their lifestyles.

Other women felt differently about their homes. They associated them with a life they had lost and felt the houses were filled with memories they wanted to get away from. They felt that a fresh start in a new house would help them to 'move on' and be part of them establishing a newly independent identity. As with so many other aspects in the whole process of separation, the meaning the women attached to different objects, in this case the meaning they attached to their houses, was a crucial aspect in the decisions they made and the emotions they experienced.

As discussed, identity is formed to a large extent in the context of family and culture. Studies by van Schalkwyk (2005) and Gregson and Caynor (2009) on women's post-divorce identity shifts were described at the start of this chapter when discussing the impact of family and cultural beliefs on how women experience separation. The confusion felt at no longer being part of a married couple and the fear felt for a future on their own were all mentioned by the women in those studies. The women in this study listed similar fears and confusion. They lost their identity as part of a married couple. They felt that a large part of the person they had been and the lifestyle they had lived for over twenty years had been lost as a result of separating. The only identity many of them associated with being separated had negative connotations that symbolised

failure and a broken home. These women struggled not to see themselves in that light.

Along with the losses felt by the women during the process of separation, they also identified gains they had made. The main gains they referred to entailed discovering themselves again. Bateson (2000), Van Schalkwyk (2005) and Gregson and Caynor (2009) also found that there were positive shifts in identity for women following divorce and that, after a period of time, they were able to embrace new opportunities and to assign more positive meanings to their past and future lives. The vast majority of the women in this study seem to have arrived at this point. They discovered that they had a voice, that they were resilient, that they could cope on their own with whatever life threw at them, that they could maintain a stable home base for their children, that they could build new friendships and construct a new life for themselves. They mentioned how important it was to have retained their own friends, their work and their own interests during the course of their married lives because they had those to fall back on when they separated.

But, building a new social life seems to have been particularly difficult for many of the women. They described how it was not so much that they were ejected from the social group of which they had been apart during their married lives but that they removed themselves from it. In small communities where there was the possibility of being in the company of their ex-husbands if they continued to attend the same venues and events, the women removed themselves. As mentioned, none of the women were in new relationships. They stated that their social lives tended to revolve around their sisters and female friends. Unlike the vibrant dating scene for over fifties described in the States (Brown and I-Fen Lin, 2012), the women in this study had not managed to find any such scene. They believed that such a scene does not yet exist in Ireland and that they have very little chance, at their age, of meeting another man.

#### **4. Family Practices following Separation**

Much of the literature on family practices post-separation focuses on parenting (Hogan *et al.*, 2002; Rhoades, 2002; Smart and May, 2004; Trinder, 2008; Timonen *et al.*, 2009; Mahon and Moore, 2011). Recent emphasis has been on examining the implications of the “rhetoric of equality in parenting” (Trinder, 2008:1310) underpinning legal arrangements about parental access following divorce in the UK, Australia and Ireland. Smart and May (2004) point out that expectations of co-operative parenting rely heavily on the resident parent, usually the mother, to do the lions share of making the arrangements work. Resident mothers are still seen as the ‘experts’ on their children’s likes and dislikes and as being in charge of the myriad of details that need to be taken care of for the smooth running of their children’s lives. In many cases, they need to continue to mediate between their children and their ex-husbands. The concept of ‘gate work’ is used to describe this type of work (Rhoades, 2002; Trinder, 2008). According to Rhoades (2002), “new narratives of selfish mothers have emerged” (p.73) which blame mothers for excluding fathers, ‘closing the gate’, and making it difficult for fathers to see their children for what are construed as the mothers’ own selfish reasons. Mothers are, thereby, blamed for failing to put their children’s needs first and for continuing to engage in conflict which is detrimental to their children’s well-being. This contention was not borne out in this study.

Most of the women had older teenagers or young adults at the time of their separations so no Court rulings were made in relation to access or custody. As mentioned, most of the children continued to live with their mothers. The mothers felt that their relationships with their children had become even closer following separation. It was left up to the fathers and the children to make their own arrangements about spending time together. The mothers seem to have tried to take a neutral role. They were aware of the discourses about the benefits for children of continued contact with fathers and they did not close the gate on contact. However, they were not prepared to do all the work of making the contact work. As Smart and Neale (1999) suggest, inconsistencies in fathering which the women were prepared to explain away and compensate for while they

were married, they were no longer prepared to compensate for when they were separated. In some cases, this seems to have resulted in contact between children and fathers diminishing overtime.

A striking finding about contact between children and their fathers is how many adult children refused to have anything to do with their fathers. In four of the fourteen families surveyed, one or all of the children refused to have any contact. This amounted to eight out of a total of thirty-five children who opted to have no communication with their fathers. (In one family where the mother was the person to initiate separation and leave home, the children initially would have nothing to do with their mother.) Difficulties between fathers and children seem to have centred on fathers being involved in new relationships and some children not being prepared to involve themselves with their fathers' new partners.

Co-operative parenting post-separation presumes that parents are on speaking terms. It presumes that harmonious separations are possible, that couples can separate amicably and that families can be re-constituted to remain connected, albeit in different ways, rather than always being broken or fragmented as a result of separation (Smart, 2004). Fischer *et al* (2005) in their Dutch study found that almost half of the couples surveyed still had some contact with their ex-spouse ten years after the divorce. However, in this study, nine out of fourteen of the women have little or no contact with their husbands/ex-husbands. While there were some women who continued to have contact with their in-laws, the more usual pattern was for that contact also to be severed. Only three out of fourteen families celebrated family events together. In two out of three of those families it was the woman who had been the initiator of the separations. In the third family, the couple had a younger child and had lived abroad for most of their married lives. In the other families fathers did not attend such family events as Christmas, birthdays, graduations, weddings or christenings together. There was even a disconnect in how the women imagined they would handle family funerals into the future.

Moore (2010) found that patterns established during marriages carried over into post-separation practices and relationships. Couples who could not communicate

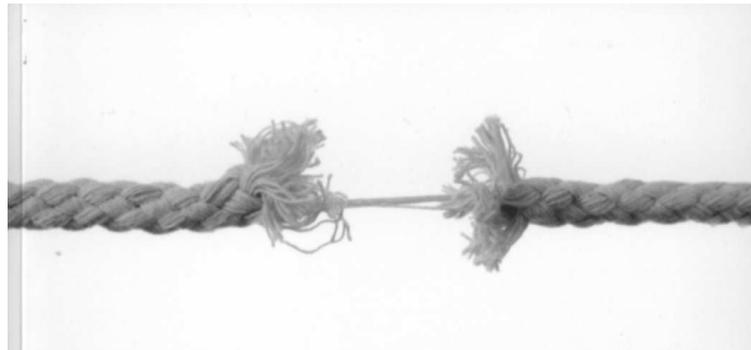
during their marriages could hardly be expected to suddenly figure out how to communicate after they separated. The data show that issues between spouses remained unresolved for years during their marriages and continued to be unresolved during their separations, with the added barriers to communication of feelings of rejection and attribution. There was no space in which to resolve these issues. The couples did not have the skills or the inclination to put the work into trying to negotiate new relationships with their ex-spouses. For most of them, a total break seemed like the easiest solution.

However, the notion of a total break goes against the ideal of an amicable/harmonious separation which is presented in current discourses on how to separate (Smart, 1999). Some of the women mentioned how they felt blamed for not making their children speak to their fathers and for not inviting the fathers to family events. To the women it was self evident that their marriages had broken down because they did not get on with their husbands or because their husbands were having affairs. It made no sense to them that they would suddenly start to be friends once they separated, even if that was what was advised for the sake of the family. Many of them keep up the appearance of being 'happily married' for years for the sake of their children and their families. They were not about to pretend to be 'happily separated' just to satisfy a norm to which they did not subscribe.

The earlier discussion about embeddedness in family and cultural beliefs about marriage and separation may help to explain why so few of the couples in this study had amicable separations. There may be a generational factor at play here. Embeddedness in traditional beliefs about lifelong marriage may be impacting on how separation is seen and on how relationships following separation are constructed. These women were brought up to believe that family based on marriage was the most important aspect of a woman's life and that it was a woman's job to take care of it. Those who initiated separation believed this and delayed separating for years. Those who did not initiate separation struggled to come to terms with losing what to them was a cornerstone of their lives. While the women may be resilient enough to re-construct their lives and to cope on their own, it appears that, for most of the non-initiators at any rate, establishing

amicable relationships with spouses who reneged on vows which they held to be sacrosanct is just too much to expect.

## 5. Connectedness and Fragmentation in the ‘Doing’ of Separation



The image shown above appears on the cover of a book entitled *When a Relationship Ends: Surviving the Emotional Roller-Coaster of Separation* (O’Hara, 2011). This image encapsulates many of the conclusions already drawn in this dissertation about connectedness and fragmentation in women’s experience of separation. The intact rope is a metaphor for an ‘intact family’ and for the many strands of connectedness that marriage entails. Marriage connects two individuals. It connects their pasts, including the beliefs and values in which they are embedded from their families of origin. It connects the couples to each other in the present and it connects them to each other into the future. It connects parents and children. It connects two extended families. It connects neighbours and friends of each of the spouses. It connects parishes and counties.

Separation entails a severing of many of the strands of connectedness that marriage encompasses. The severing can take place over many years by the gradual fraying of individual strands or it can occur very suddenly. Relationships can be fragmenting for years or they can appear to break down very suddenly. Some women described marriages which had been deteriorating for years. Other women described marriages which ended very suddenly due to infidelity but which, in hindsight, may also have been deteriorating for some time.

The image shows that on each side of the break the strands are still entwined. The majority of the women in this study remained connected to their children, to their families of origin and to their friends. They re-connected with themselves and also made some new friendships. The image also shows that while the most of the rope may be broken that some strands remain connected. Three of the women and most of the children maintained relationships with the fathers. A few women and children maintained relationships with their fathers' families. The images for each of the women will be slightly different. If the fourteen images were superimposed on each other, the composite picture produced would provide a visual representation of the amount of connectedness and fragmentation that followed separation for the women in this study.

Literature on harmonious separations suggests that more connections are maintained than was found in this study. Significant fragmentation was found in relationships between former spouses. In most cases, there was almost no contact maintained with ex-husbands. Fragmentation was found in relationships between fathers and adult children. Fragmentation was found in relationships with former in-laws. Eight children had refused to have anything to do with their fathers. Only three out of fourteen families celebrated family events together. Fragmentation was found in relationships with joint friends. The women removed themselves from situations in which they might bump into their ex-spouses. Socially, many of the women felt very isolated following separation. They felt that they did not 'fit' in a society that is dominated by couples and 'intact' families. For some, this was the most difficult aspect of life after separation.

Marriage involves a whole series of connections being forged. Separation results in many of those connections being severed but it also results, according to the women in this study, in many other relationships being strengthened, for example relationships with themselves, with their sisters, with adult children, with work colleagues. The framework of connectedness and fragmentation allows an image to emerge of the status of different strands or threads in separated women's lives.

Some threads are broken, but women's lives continue to be about relationships and connectedness to a wide range of people.

### **Concluding Comments**

None of the women in this study found the journey through separation easy. It was accompanied by a series of major losses in their lives that they are still coming to terms with. However, the study showed clearly that the processes and the outcomes of separation were different for different women. Some are "in the sunshine" (Lisa), "have found their voice" (Eileen) and are "much happier to be free, to be a free person, to be single" (Geraldine). Other women are coping and functioning but carry the scars of the hurt they have been through, as Frances says "I kind of feel so shattered and battered and broken by it and nobody seems to notice because you can't go round with a long face on you. I feel my heart is broken and that it can't be mended". Her plea is for people to be more understanding of what women who separate in midlife are going through. This study set out to contribute to that understanding.

The strength of the dissertation is in the richness of the data and in how it enabled the women's voices to be heard. It captures not only the practical outcomes of separation, in terms of income and accommodation, but, more importantly, it captures the emotions the women felt during the various stages of the separation process. It is important to capture the emotions behind the figures and to provide a space in which women can be heard. The sense of loss experienced as part of the process of separation needs to be acknowledged. The sense of loss is related to the centrality of marriage in this generation of Irish women's lives. The message the women conveyed is that just because separation is more common, does not mean that it is less painful. There is a danger that the shift to normalising separation and to expectations of being able to 'move on' quickly and establish amicable relationships with ex-spouses will result in the emotionally difficult aspects of separation being diluted and silenced.

The manner in which this age group of Irish women are doing separation is a function of both their past and present lives. They are at the forefront of change.

They have few Irish role models to guide them in how to separate in midlife. It is unlikely that future generations of women will experience separation in quite the same way as this age cohort of women. It was important to capture this experience at this point in time. The study has given voice to a group of women whose experience was previously invisible. The study ends on a positive note with all of the women saying that they have found the entire process of separation difficult, but that they will survive and grow stronger and re-build their lives around relationships with their children, with their family and friends and, most importantly, with their newly-found selves.

## REFERENCES

Ahrons, C. R. (2005) "Divorce: An Unscheduled Family Transition" in B. Carter and M. Mc Goldrick (eds) (2005) *The Expanded Family Life Cycle*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Boston: Allyn and Bacon Classics.

Amato, P. A. (1994) "The Impact of Divorce on Men and Women in India and the United States", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, Vol. XXV, No.2.

Amato, P. A. (2000) "The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 62 (Nov. 2000): 1269-1287.

Amato, P. A. and Previti, D. (2003) "People's Reasons for Divorcing: Gender, Social Class, the Life Course and Adjustment", *Journal of Family Issues*, 24: 602.

Amato, P. A. and Wang, H. (2000) "Predictors of Divorce Adjustment: Stressors, Resources and Definitions", *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62: 655-668.

Andreb, H., Borgloh, B., Brockel, M., Gisselmann, M. and Hummelsheim, D. (2006) "Causes and Consequences of Divorce: Cross-national and Cohort Differences, an Introduction to this Special Issue", *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5, pp. 533-560.

Australian Institute of Family Studies (2000) "Australian Divorce Transitions Project", *Family Matters*, 55, autumn ([www.aifs.org.au](http://www.aifs.org.au)).

Bacik, I. (2004) *Kicking and Screaming: Dragging Ireland into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Dublin: O'Brien Press.

Barry, U. (2008) *Where are we now? New feminist perspectives on women in contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Tasc at New Ireland.

Bateson, M. C. (1989) *Composing a Life*, New York: Grove Press.

Bateson, M. C. (2000) *Full Circles, Overlapping Lives (Culture and Generation in Transition)*, New York: Random House.

Beale, J. (1987) *Women in Ireland*, Dublin: Macmillan.

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, London: Sage.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (1995) *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Cambridge: Polity.

Beck, U. and Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002) *Individualisation*, London: Sage.

Bernard, J. (1982) *The Future of Marriage*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

- Bernardes, J. (1997) *Family Studies: An Introduction*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Berry, D. B. (1998) *The Divorce Sourcebook*, Cambridge: Lowell House.
- Binchy, W. (1984) *Marriage Breakdown*, Dublin: Veritas.
- Bogolub, E. (1991) "Women and Mid-life Divorce: Some Practice Issues", *Social Work*, Vol.36, 5
- Bowlby, J. (1983) *Attachment* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Tavistock Institute, London; Basic Books.
- Brady, Cardinal S. (2009) "The Family as the Foundation of Society" in H. Bohan (ed) (2009) *Family Life Today*, Dublin: Veritas.
- Breen, R. and Cooke, L.P. (2005) "The Persistence of Gendered Division of Domestic Labour", *European Sociological Review*, 21(1), 43-57.
- Brody, H. (1974) *Inishkillane, Change and Decline in the West of Ireland*, New York: Schocken.
- Brown, S. and I-Fen Lin (2012) "The Gray Divorce Revolution", Working Paper, Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University.
- Bryman, A. (2004) *Social Research Methods*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Buehler, C. and Legg, B. (1993) "Mothers' receipt of Social Support and their psychological well-being following Marital Separation", *Journal of Social and personal Relationships*, 10:21-38.
- Burley, J. and Regan, F. (2002) "Divorce in Ireland: The Fear, the Floodgates and the Reality", *International Journal of Law, Policy and Family*, Vol.16, pp. 202-222.
- Burr, V. (2003) *Social Constructionism* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), London: Routledge.
- Byrne, A. and Lentin, R. (2000) *(Re)searching Women*, Dublin: I.P.A.
- Carsten, J. (2004) *After Kinship*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carter, B. and McGoldrick, M. (eds) (2005) *The Expanded Family Life Cycle*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Boston: Allyn and Bacon Classics.
- Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Ch.1 (1994), Dublin: Veritas.
- Catholic World News (1997) [www.indcatholic](http://www.indcatholic.com) news.com.

- Cheal, D. (2002) *Sociology of Family Life*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Central Statistics Office (2007) *Census 2006, Principal Demographic Results*, Cork: C.S.O.
- Central Statistics Office (2011) *Men and Women in Ireland 2010*, Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Central Statistics Office (2012) *This is Ireland- Highlights from Census 2011, Part 1*, Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Central Statistics Office (2012) *Profile 5 Households and Families* Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Clarke, L. and Berrington, A. (1999) *Socio-demographic predictors of divorce*, ([www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk)).
- Clear, C. (2001) *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961*, Dublin: Irish Academic Press.
- Coen, M. (2008) "Religious Ethos and employment equality: a comparative Irish perspective" *Legal Studies* Vol. 28 No 3, pp. 452 – 474. Magdalen College, Oxford.
- Coleman, L. and Glenn, F. (2009) *When couples part: Understanding the consequences for adults and children* ([www.oneplusone.org.uk](http://www.oneplusone.org.uk)).
- Commission on the Status of Women (1973) *Report of the First Commission on the Status of Women*, Dublin: Stationary Office.
- Conneely, S. (2002) *Family Mediation in Ireland*, Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Connolly, L. (2003). *The Irish women's movement: From revolution to devolution*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- Connolly, L. and O'Toole, L. (2005) *Documenting Irish Feminisms: The second wave*, Dublin: Woodside Press.
- Considine, M. & Dukelow, F. (2009) *Irish Social Policy. A Critical Introduction*. Dublin: Gill & Mc Millan.
- Coulter, C. (1997) "Goodbye Daddy, Hello Divorce" in A. Bradley and M.G. Valiulis, (1997). *Gender and Sexuality in Modern Ireland*. Amherst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Coulter, C. (2008) *Family Law in Practice: A Study of Cases in the Circuit Court*, Dublin: Clarus Press.
- Delphy, C and Leonard, D. (1992) *Familial Exploitation: A New Analysis of Marriage in Contemporary Western Societies*, Cambridge: Polity.

Denscombe, M. (2010) *The Good Research Guide: For Small Scale Research Projects*, Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Denzin, N. K and Lincoln, Y.S. (2003) *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), London: Sage.

De Roiste, A. (2006) "The Family: A Systems Perspective" in T. O'Connor, M. Murphy (eds) *Social Care in Ireland*, C.I.T., Cork.

De Vaus, D. (2004) *Diversity and Change in Australian Families: Statistical Profiles*, published by The Australian Institute of Family Studies ([www.aifs.gov.au](http://www.aifs.gov.au)).

Dillon, M. (1993) *Debating Divorce: Moral Conflict, in Ireland*, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Dooney, S. and O'Toole, J. (1998) *Irish Government Today*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan Ltd.

Dowd, P. (2006) *A Swift Pure Cry*. Oxford: David Fickling Books.

Dronkers, J., Kalmijn, M. and Wagner, M. (2006) "Causes and Consequences of Divorce: Cross-National and Cohort Differences" *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 22, No. 5, pp. 479-481.

Election Literature 1995 [www.iriselectionliterature.wordpress.com](http://www.iriselectionliterature.wordpress.com).

Erwin, K. (2007) "More disputes could go to mediation", *Family Law Matters*, Vol. 1, No. 3, pp. 58-60.

Eurostat [www.eurostat.ec.eu/statistics](http://www.eurostat.ec.eu/statistics)

Fahey, T. and Field, C. A. (2008) *Families in Ireland*, Dublin: Government Publications Office.

Ferriter, D. (2004) *The Transformation of Ireland 1900-2000*, London: Profile Books Ltd.

Ferriter, D. (2009) *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland*, London: Profile Books Ltd.

Finch, J. and Mason, J. (1993) *Negotiating Family Responsibilities*, London: Tavistock/Routledge.

Finch, J. and Mason, J. (2000) *Passing On: Kinship and Inheritance in England*, Londo: Routledge.

Fine-Davis, M. (2011) *Attitudes to Family Formation in Ireland*, Dublin: Trinity College.

- Fisher, B. and Alberti, R. (2006) *Rebuilding when your Relationship ends*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) Atascadero: Impact Publishers.
- Fischer, T., deGraaf, P. and Kalmijn, M. (2005) “Friendly and antagonistic contact between former spouses after divorce: Patterns and Determinants”, *Journal of Family Issues*, 2005; 26; 1131-1163.
- Fitzgerald, G. (1973) *Towards a New Ireland*, Dublin: Torc Books.
- Flick, U. (2009) *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (4<sup>th</sup> edition), London: Sage.
- Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Giddens, A. (2006) *Sociology* (5<sup>th</sup> edition), Cambridge: Polity.
- Gillies, V. (2003) *Family and Intimate Relationships: A Review of the Sociological Research*, London, Families and Social Capital ESRC Research Group, South Bank University.
- Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Gillis, J. (1996) *A World of their own Making: Myth, Ritual and the Quest for Family Values*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Gillis, J. (2004) ‘Gathering Together’, in A. Etzioni and J. Bloom (eds) *We are what we celebrate: Understanding Holidays and Rituals*, New York: New York University Press.
- Government of Ireland (1937) *Bunreacht na hÉireann*, Dublin: G.P.O.
- Gregson, J. and Creynar, M. (2009) “Finding “Me” Again: Women’s Post Divorce Identity Shifts”, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50:564-582.
- Hammersley, M. (2011) *Methodology: Who Needs It?* Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Harding, S. (1987) *Is there a feminist methodology?* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Henderson, M. and Argyle, M. (1985) “The Source and Support given to Women at Divorce/Separation”, *British Journal of Social Work*, 15:57-65.
- Hill, M. (2003) *Women in Ireland: A Century of Change*, Belfast: Black Staff Press.
- Hilliard, B. (1995) “Changing Perspectives in the Sociological Study of the Family” in I. McCarthy (ed) *Irish Family Studies*, Dublin: UCD Press.

Hilton, J. M. and Anderson, T.L. (2009) "Characteristics of Women with Children who Divorce in Midlife compared to those who remain Married", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 50:309-329, 2009.

Hogan, D., Halpenny, A.M. and Greene, S. (2002) *Children's Experience of Parental Separation*, Dublin: Children's Research Centre, Trinity College.

Holland, M. (1985) "Why the Flynn case is so important" in A. Bourke, S. Kilfeather, M. Luddy, M. Mac Curtain, G. Meaney, M. Ni Dhonnchada, M. O'Dowd and C. Wills, in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing (2002 ) Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Vol. 5 (eds) Cork: Cork University Press in association with Field Day.

Hume, M. (2007) "Unpicking the Threads: Emotion as central to the Theory and Practice of Researching Violence", *Women's Studies International Forum*, (30).

Hussey, G. (1993) *Ireland Today: Anatomy of a Changing State*. Dublin: Town House and Country House.

Inglis, T. (1998) *Moral Monopoly*, Dublin: UCD Press.

Inglis, T. (2003) *Truth, Power and Lies: Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies*, Dublin: UCD Press.

Inglis, T. (2005) "Origins and Legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Social Control in Modern Ireland", *Eire-Ireland*, Vol.40:3 and 4, Fall/Winter 2005, pp. 9-37.

Inglis, T. (2007) "Catholic Identity in Contemporary Ireland: Belief and Belonging to Tradition", *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol.22, No.2, pp. 205-220.

Inglis, T. (2008) *Global Ireland: Same Difference*. New York: Routledge.

Iona Institute (2007) *Marriage breakdown and family structure in Ireland*. <http://www.ionainstitute.ie>.

Irish Election Literature (1995) [www.electionliterature.ie](http://www.electionliterature.ie).

Irish Family Mediation Service [www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie)

Irish Statute Books, [www.irishstatutebooks.ie](http://www.irishstatutebooks.ie).

Irish Times, [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com).

Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown (1985) *Report of the Joint Committee on Marriage Breakdown (1985)*, Dublin: G.P.O.

- Kalmijn, M. (2010) "Country Differences in the Effects of Divorce on Well-Being: The role of Norms, Support and Selectivity", *European Sociological Review*, Vol. 26, No.4. pp. 475-490.
- Kenny, M. (2003) "Forty Years On", *Studies*, Vol. 92, No.365 (Spring, 2003), pp. 7-12.
- Kennedy, F. (2001) *From Cottage to Creche*, Dublin: I. P. A.
- Kiely, G. (1989) *Finding Love*, Dublin: Poolbeg Press.
- Kiely, G. (1998) "Marriage and relationship counselling in a changing society" in Final Report of the Commission on the Family (1998) *Strengthening Families for Life*, Dublin: Minister for Social Community and Family Affairs.
- Kittay, E. (2002) "Love's Labor Revisited" *Hypatia*, Vol. 17, No.3, pp. 237-250.
- Kubler-Ross, E. (1997) *On Death and Dying*, (Reprint edition) New York: Scribner.
- Kusgen McDaniel, A. and Coleman, M. (2003) "Women's Experience of midlife Divorce following long-term Marriage", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 38(3/4):103-128.
- Lawler, S. (2002) "Narrative in Social Research" in T. May (ed), (2002) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage.
- Lowenstein, L. F. (2007) *Parental Alienation: how to understand and address Parental Alienation resulting from acrimonious Divorce*, Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing Ltd.
- Lunn, P., Fahey, T. and Hannan, C. (2009) *Family Figures: Family Dynamics and Family Types in Ireland, 1986-2006*, Dublin: ESRI and UCD.
- Lupton, D. (1998) *The Emotional Self*, London: Sage.
- Lynch, K. (1988) "The ethos of girls' schools: an analysis of differences between male and female schools", *Social Studies* 10(1/2) pp.11-13.
- Lynch, K. (1999) *Equality in Education*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Lynch, K. (2007) "Love Labour as a distinct and non-commodifiable form of care labour". *The Sociological Review*, 55:3 550-570.
- Lynch, K. and Lyons, M. (2008) "The Gendered Order of Caring" in Barry, U. (2008). *Where are we now? New feminist perspectives on women in contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Tasc at New Ireland.

McDaniel, A. and Coleman, M. (2003) “Women’s Experiences of Midlife Divorce Following Long-Term Marriage”, *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, Vol.38 (3/4).

McCafferty, N. (1985, reprinted 2010) *A Woman to Blame: Kerry Babies Case*. Cork: Attic Press.

McCormick, J. (2008) *Understanding the European Union*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

McDonnell, A. (1999) *When Strangers Marry: A Study of Marriage Breakdown in Ireland*, Dublin: Columbia Press.

McGinnity, G. and Russell, H. (2008) *Gender Inequalities in Time Use: The Distribution of Caring, Housework and Employment among Women and Men in Ireland*, Dublin: E.S.R.I.

McGréil, M. (1997) *Prejudice in Ireland Revisited*, Maynooth: Survey and Research Unit, St.Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

McGoldrick, M. (2005) “Women through the Family Life Cycle” in B. Carter and M. Mc Goldrick (eds) (2005) *The Expanded Family Life Cycle*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Boston: Allyn and Bacon Classics.

McKay, S. (2008) “Introduction” to Barry, U. (2008). *Where are we now? New feminist perspectives on women in contemporary Ireland*. Dublin: Tasc at New Ireland.

McKeown, K., Lehane, P., Rock, R., Haase, T. and Pratschke, J. (2002) *Unhappy marriages: Does Counselling help?* Accord [www.accord.ie](http://www.accord.ie).

McKeown, K., Pratschke, J. and Haase, T. (2003) *Family Well-Being: What Makes a Difference*, Report, Shannon: Ceifin.

McKeown, K., Haase, T. and Pratschke, J. (2004) *Distressed Relationships: Does Counselling Help*, Dublin: MRCS.

Mahon, E. (1994) “Ireland-A Private Patriarchy”, *Environment and Planning, A*, 26, 1994, pp. 1277-1296.

Mahon, E. and Moore, E. (2011) *Post – Separation Parenting: A study of separation and divorce agreements made in the Family Law Courts of Ireland and their implications for parent-child contact and family lives*, Dublin: Government Publications.

*Marital Breakdown: A Review and proposed Changes* (undated) P1 9104 Dublin: Stationary Office.

- Martin, F. (2002) "From Prohibition to Approval: The Limitations of the 'No Clean Break' Divorce Regime in the Republic of Ireland", *International Journal of Law, Policy and Family*, Vol.16, pp. 223-259.
- Mason, J. (2002) "Qualitative Interviewing: Asking, Listening and Interpreting" in T. May (ed.) (2002) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage.
- May, T. (1997) (ed.) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- May, T. (2002) *Qualitative Research in Action*. London: Sage.
- Maynard, M. and Purvis, J. (1994) *Researching Women's Lives from a Feminist Perspective*. London: Taylor and Francis.
- Montenegro, X., Fisher, L. and Gross, S. (2004) "The Divorce Experience: A Study of Divorce at midlife and beyond", Report, Washington, D.C.: *AARP The Magazine*, (May 2004.)
- Moore, E. (2010) *Renegotiating Family Practices Post Separation; An Irish Case Study*, Phd. Thesis submitted to Trinity College, Dublin.
- Morgan, D. (1985) *The Family, Politics and Social Theory*, London; Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Morgan, D. (1996) *Family Connections*, Oxford: Polity.
- Morgan, D. (2002) "Sociological Perspectives on the Family" in A. Carling, S. Duncan and R. Edwards (eds) *Analysing Families: Morality and rationality in policy and practice*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Nestor, J. (2006) *Irish Family Law*, Dublin: Gill and McMillan.
- Oakley, A. (1999) "People's ways of knowing: gender and methodology" in S. Hood, B. Mayall and S. Oliver *Critical issues in Social Research: Power and Prejudice*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Oakley, A. (2005) *The Ann Oakley Reader: gender, women and social science*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- O'Brien, M. (2008) *The Irish Times : A History*, Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- O'Brien, M. and Rafter, K. (eds) *Independent Newspapers – A History*. Dublin: Four Courts Press.
- O'Carroll, G. (2007) *The Sheriff. A Detective's story*, Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing Company (Edinburgh) Ltd.
- O'Connor, A. (1999) "The Kerry Babies Mystery", *Sunday Independent* November 29<sup>th</sup> 1999. [www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie).

- O'Connor, C. (2001) "Marital Counselling Research Project", [www.fsa.ie](http://www.fsa.ie)
- O'Connor, P. (1998) *Emerging Voices: Women in Contemporary Society*, Dublin: Irish Institute of Public Administration.
- O'Hara, L. (2011) *When a Relationship Ends: Surviving the Emotional Roller-Coaster of Separation*, Dublin: Orpen Press.
- O'Hara, P. (1997) "Women in Farming Families: Shedding the Past and Fashioning the Future" in A. Byrne and M. Leonard (eds.) *Women and Irish Society, A Sociological Reader*, Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
- O'Mahony, E. (2010) *Religious Practice and Values in Ireland: A summary of European Values Study 4<sup>th</sup> wave data*, Irish Catholic Bishop's Conference. [www.catholicbishops.ie](http://www.catholicbishops.ie).
- O'Mahony, E. (2010) *Practice and Belief among Catholics in the Republic of Ireland; A summary of data from the European Social Survey Round 4 (2009/2010) and the International Social Science Programme Religion 111 (2008/2009)*, Irish Bishops Conference. [www.catholicbishops.ie](http://www.catholicbishops.ie).
- Parsons, T. and Bales, R. (1955) *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*, New York: Free Press.
- Rhoades, H. (2002) "The non-contact mother" *International Journal of Law, Policy and Family*, Vol.16, pp. 87-94.
- Richie, J. and Lewis, J. (eds.) (2003) *Qualitative Research Practice. A guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, London: Sage.
- Sakraida, T. (2005a) "Common Themes in the Divorce Transition Experience of Midlife Women", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 43(1/2): 69-88.
- Sakraida, T. (2005b) "Divorce Transition Differences for Midlife Women", *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 26: 225-249.
- Sarantakos, S. (2005) *Social Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> edition), Melbourne: McMillan Education.
- Scannal (2006) RTE1 [www.rte.ie](http://www.rte.ie).
- Sevenhuijsen, S. (1998) *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Shatter, A. (1997) *Family Law* (4<sup>th</sup> edition) Dublin: Butterworths.
- Share, P., Corcoran, M and Conway, B. (2012) *Sociology of Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and MacMillan

- Sheehan, G. and Fehlberg, B. (2000) "Families, divorce and family law", *Family Matters* No.55 Autumn 2000, Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Sigle-Rushton, W. (2010) "Men's Unpaid Work and Divorce: Reassessing Specialisation and Trade in British Families", *Feminist Economics*, 16(2): pp.1-26, Research by the London School of Economics.
- Silva, E.B. and Smart, C. (1999) (eds) *The New Family*, London: Sage Publications.
- Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research*, London: Sage.
- Smart, C. (1984) *The Ties that Bind: Law, Marriage and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Relations*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Smart, C. (1999) "Divorce in England 1950-2000: A Moral Tale", CAVA workshop Paper 2.
- Smart, C. (2004) "Changing Landscapes of Family Life: Rethinking Divorce", *Social Policy and Society*, 3: 401-408, Cambridge University Press.
- Smart, C. and May, V. (2004) "Why can't they agree? The underlying complexity of contact and residence", *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, Vol. 26, No. 4, pp. 347-360.
- Smart, C. (2005a) "Changing Commitments: A study of Close Kin after Divorce in England", in M. MacLean (ed.) *Family Law and Family Values*, Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- Smart, C. (2005b) "Textures of Family Life: Further Thoughts on Change and Commitment", *Journal of Social Policy*, 34 (4): 541-556.
- Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life: New Directions in Sociological Thinking*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Smart, C., Neale, B. (1999) *Family Fragments ?* Cambridge: Polity.
- Smart, C. and Shipman, B. (2004) "Visions in Monochrome: Marriage and the Individualisation Thesis", *Sociology*, 55 (4): 491-509.
- Smerglia, V., Miller, N. and Kort-Butler, L. (1999) "The Impact of Social Support on Women's Adjustment to Divorce: A Literature Review and Analysis", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 32(1/2).
- Spencer, L., Richie, J., O'Connor, W. (2003) "Analysis: Practices, Principles and Processes" in J. Richie and J. Lewis *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers*, London: Sage.
- Stanley, L. and Wise, S. (1993) *Breaking Out Again*. London: Routledge.

Steward, J. and Clarke, V.A. (1995) "The Role of Social Support in ameliorating Stress in Separated Women with Children", *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 47, 3:164-170.

Subotnik, R, and Harris, G. (2005) *Surviving Infidelity: Making Decisions and Recovering from the Pain*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) Avon Massachusetts: Adams Media.

Sunday Independent (1999) [www.sundayindependent.ie](http://www.sundayindependent.ie).

Thomas, C. and Ryan, M. (2008) "Women's Perception of the Divorce experience: a Qualitative Study", *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 49(3/4).

Timonen, V., Doyle, M. and O'Dwyer, C. (2009) *The Role of Grandparents in Divorced and Separated Families*, Dublin: Family Support Agency.

Tovey, H. and Share, P. (2000) *A Sociology of Ireland*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan.

Trinder, L. (2008) "Maternal Gate Closing and Gate Opening in post-divorce Families", *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 29, pp. 1298-1324.

Uhlenberg, P. Cooney, T. and Boyd, R. (1990) "Divorce for Women after Midlife", *Journal of Gerontology*, 45(1):S3-S11.

Uunk, W. (2004) "The Economic Consequences of Divorce for Women in the European Union: The Impact of Welfare State Arrangements", *European Journal of Population* 20: 251-285.

Van Schalkwyk, G. (2005) "Explorations of Post-Divorce Experiences: Women's Reconstructions of Self", *ANZJFT*, 26, 2:90-97.

Vatican, *Humanae Vitae* [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

Weston, R. and Smyth, B. (2000) "Financial Living Standards after Divorce", *Family Matters* No.55 Autumn 2000, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Whelan, C. and Fahey, T. (1994) "Marriage and Family" in C. Whelan (ed) (1994) *Values and Social Change in Ireland*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.

Wineman, D. (1999) "Divorce: Its Impact on the older female" Doctoral Dissertation, Institute for Clinical Social Work Chicago.

Wolcott, I. and Hughes, J. (1999) "Towards understanding the reasons for divorce", Working Paper No.20, Australian Institute of Family Studies.

Worden, J. W. (1991) (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) *Grief Counselling and Grief Therapy*, London: Tavistock.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1

My home address

My mobile number

Email address

#### A Study on the Support Needs of Irish Women who Separate in Midlife

#### Questionnaire on Background Details of Participants

(Rather than taking time in the interview to collect personal background details, it would be helpful if this questionnaire could be completed in advance.)

(1)

<b>Family of Origin Details</b>	<b>Year of birth</b>	<b>Year of death</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
Mother				
Father				
Self				
Sibling 1 (m/f)*				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				
7				
8				

\*(Indicate whether male or female)

(2) Were you brought up in a rural or an urban area? Rural  Urban

(3) What standard of education did you complete?

Primary                       Secondary                       Third Level

(4) What did you work at prior to marriage? \_\_\_\_\_

(5) In which year did you get married? \_\_\_\_\_

(6) What age was your husband when you got married? \_\_\_\_\_

(7) How long had you been going out together? \_\_\_\_\_

(8) Did you cohabit before marriage? Yes  No

(9) What years were your children born? 1. \_\_\_\_\_  
2. \_\_\_\_\_  
3. \_\_\_\_\_  
4. \_\_\_\_\_

(10) Did you work outside the home during your marriage? Yes  No

Part time  Full time

(11) In which year did you separate? \_\_\_\_\_

(12) Do you have a separation agreement? Yes  No

(13) Are you divorced? Yes  No

(14) Which sources of support have you found beneficial since separating?

	Very beneficial	Beneficial	Not beneficial	Not Applicable
Mother				
Father				
Sisters				
Brothers				
Friends				
Work colleagues				
Doctors				
Lawyers				
Counsellors				
Religious Personnel				
Other				

Many thanks for completing this questionnaire. There will be an opportunity in the interview to clarify any questions that you are unclear about and to discuss the matters raised in greater detail.

Lucy Hyland

## **Appendix 2**

My home address

My mobile number

Email address

### A Study on the Support Needs of Irish Women who Separate in Midlife

#### Description of Project – Information for Participants

I am currently studying for a Doctorate in Social Science at University College Cork. As part of the Doctorate, I am required to carry out an original piece of research. The topic I have chosen to investigate is the support needed and availed of by Irish women who separate in midlife. While separation has become more common in recent years, women's experience of separation is not topic which has been researched in an Irish context. My hope is that this study will add to our understanding of how women experience separation and of the supports that exist or need to be put in place to assist them.

I plan to interview a small number of women who have separated since 1997 and who were aged between 40 and 59 years of age at the time of their separation. Participation in the study will entail completing a brief background questionnaire and taking part in an interview which is envisaged to last approximately one and a half hours. The interview will be taped and a transcript will be typed and sent to participants for approval. A second interview/ telephone conversation will then take place to clarify points made in the first interview and to include any material which participants may wish to add.

The interview will include discussion on the following themes:

- courtship
- marriage
- events surrounding separation
- consequences of separation
- informal support and formal support

To protect confidentiality and anonymity, no names will appear on either the questionnaires or the interview transcripts. Some extracts from the questionnaires and from the interviews will be presented in the thesis. All identifying information will be altered. The thesis will be read by my college supervisor and by other academic personnel involved in the assessment of the dissertation. The tapes will be stored securely. The thesis will be available in the library at UCC for other researchers. Articles based on the research are likely to be published in the future.

Participation in the study is entirely voluntary. If you are willing to take part, please complete the attached consent form. I will phone to arrange a time for the interview.

Many thanks

### **Appendix 3**

My home address

My mobile number

Email address

#### A Study on the Support Needs of Irish Women who Separate in Midlife

##### Informed Consent Form

Before completing and signing this form, you will have been provided with written information about this research study. This sheet will have explained what information is going to be collected and in what manner, as well as what will be done with the information collected.

Giving your consent by signing this form means you are consenting to participate in this study. However, it also allows you the freedom to withdraw at any point of the research and not to discuss any topic or answer any question that you are not comfortable with.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in Lucy Hyland's study on the support needs of Irish women who separate in midlife.

The purpose of the study has been explained to me in writing.

I am participating voluntarily.

I am aware that the interview(s) I participate in will be recorded and transcribed.

I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use material relating to me at any time and that the material will be deleted.

I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.

I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in any conference papers or subsequent publications if I give my permission overleaf:

(Please tick one box)

I agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I do not agree to quotation/publication of extracts from my interview

I understand that the tapes and the transcripts of the interviews will be securely stored.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix 4

# CENSUS 2011 RESULTS **Marital status population pyramid**

Figure 2 Population aged 15-95 by single year of age and marital status

