SINGLE-PARENT FAMILY STRENGTH:
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore the lived experience of strength within female-headed, single-parent families with school-aged children 2 or more years following separation or divorce. There is little research describing the healthy functioning of female-headed families. For the most part, the analysis of single-parent family functioning has been understood as a deviation from the norm because the norm has been determined by studying the conventional nuclear family experience. The divorce crisis may stimulate family growth and development in ways that are not available in the two-parent family system. Knowledge of the strength of the single-parent family system falls short.

A phenomenological research design was used to explore the strength within single-parent families through in-depth conversational interviews with 4 mothers and their 8 children. Purposive and snowballing approaches were used to recruit participants for the study. The essential criteria for participating in the study were that the mothers and children must experience the phenomenon of strength and then be able to articulate and reflect on the experience.

Each transcript of the mothers' and children's oral description of strength was analyzed using a phenomenological method. Nine essential themes were inducted from the data, and a fundamental structure of strength was developed.

The experience of inner strength for the women in the study was gained by
(a) introspecting to discover self; (b) emoting to develop an understanding of their real selves; (c) knowing, which grew out of their embeddedness in human relationships; (d) finding freedom to create their own destiny, as well as to shape their children's destiny; (e) gaining resilience in order to adjust, change, and overcome adversity; and (f) transcending the ordinary limits of ordinary experience and understanding. The women's strength sustained the family and is reflected in the following themes: (a) cocreating family harmony, (b) sharing family power, and (c) humane connecting.

The research findings have implications for nursing practice, theory development, and research. In order to provide thoughtful, sensitive care to single-parent families, nurses must understand the strength of single-parent families so they can help them to assert control over conditions that affect their lives.
Dedicated to my younger brother, Greg, who has gone before me and led the way, until we meet again and to my parents, who taught me about the joy of tears, and to succeed even in my darkest hours.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

What is perceived as the deterioration of the family and the redefinition of the family unit is one of the most challenging dilemmas facing nursing in the 1990s (Styles, 1990). Traditionally, the single-parent family has been defined in comparison to the intact-nuclear family; thus, a negative model has been used to describe the single-parent family (Mednick, 1987). Likewise, North Americans tend to look at the single-parent family in a somewhat negative way, and the nuclear family continues as the stereotypic “ideal” family form. There is no doubt that divorce can have devastating effects on the family. The divorce crisis, however, also may stimulate family growth and development in ways that are not available in the two-parent family system. These factors are not often considered, discussed, or researched. It is no longer acceptable to consider that intact-nuclear families are the only healthy families. Single-parent families are neither superior nor inferior to intact families; they are simply different. The “differences can become sources of strength, rather than symbols of failure” (West, 1986, p. 212). Consequently, it is important to explore the strength of single-parent families that contributes to healthy functioning of these family systems.

A phenomenological design was used to explore the strength within single-
parent family units 2 or more years following separation or divorce through interviews with mothers. In addition, interviews with their children aged 8 to 15 years old were conducted, and projective techniques were used as appropriate. This research focused on single-parent families in a major city in the province of Alberta, Canada.

**Background and Significance of the Problem**

The number of single-parent families has increased substantially in the last 2 decades. In 1990, 14% of all families in Canada were lone-parent families with children under 18 compared to 11% in 1980. In 1990, 13% of all families in Alberta were lone-parent families compared to 9% in 1971 and 10% in 1980. In 1990, approximately 87% of lone-parent families were headed by women, and 13% were headed by lone-male parents. The high rates of lone parenthood are due to separation, divorce, or childbirth outside of marriage (Premier’s Council in Support of Alberta Families, 1992).

With the growing number of divorces resulting in single-parent families, as well as the steadily increasing number of women in the work force, questions arise about whether the family is in crisis. A sense of crisis is derived from the prevailing view that the conventional or nuclear family is being lost, whereby father is the sole economic provider and mother is the homemaker who bears major responsibility for the socialization and nurturance of dependent children (Scanzoni, 1983).
Some feminists also challenge prevalent assumptions about the ideological nuclear family as the only desirable and legitimate family form; that is, they associate this family form with the oppression of women. They argue that within the nuclear family structure women are in subordinate positions as they are “excluded from gaining direct access to valued resources such as income, recognized and status-giving work, and political authority” (Thorne, 1982, p. 4). Moreover, women have little power within the nuclear family form, as they are dependent on their husbands for economic survival, their unpaid work at home is generally undervalued, and the work of mothering is accomplished in isolation to the detriment of mother and child (Thorne, 1982).

According to Swidler (1980), new family patterns are emerging; that is, women are no longer the unique emotional center that they are or have been in the conventional family. Simultaneously, men are no longer the unique instrumental center that they are or have been in the conventional family. Either partner can earn money, engage in child care, and carry out household duties. Scanzoni (1983) believed that the nuclear family model is out of synchrony with the dynamic North American culture. Moreover, Popenoe (1988) speculated that the family career is moving toward a postnuclear trend. He argued that over time there has been a decline of paternal authority; partial removal of the nuclear family form with its kin-group embeddedness; a partial loss of family functions such as economic, religious, educational, and political; a decrease in family size; an emphasis on individualism; and an increase in affective relationships within the
family. Due to the aforementioned trends, he predicted that in advanced societies there will be an increase in the pursuit of individualism; marriages will cease to have any legal or social form, and more adult and social relationships may become random liaisons; norms of gender roles and socialization may be determined increasingly by people through their relationships; and child rearing may be taken over by agencies even more than currently. Consequently, fresh thinking is required about alternative models of family life and the relationships between family and society.

The majority of research in the field of single parenting has been framed within the value context of father as economic provider: marriage and family are structured with strict roles and functions, and the nuclear family model is considered normal and other alternative models of family life are deviant (Mednick, 1987). The research emanating from this view looked for “assumed negative consequences of stability, satisfaction, well-being, mental health, adjustment, delinquency, and so forth for children and adults who deviated from this ideal form” (Scanzoni, Polonko, Teachman, & Thompson, 1989, p. 13).

The prevailing view among numerous researchers and clinical practitioners is that the traditional nuclear family is the most desirable form of family organization, which subsequently leads to research agendas that focus on “structure as opposed to process, stability as opposed to change” (Scanzoni et al., 1989, p. 13). More specifically, the conception of the family as nuclear is inadequate and misleading when relied upon for an understanding of family dynamics. Uzoka
(1979) argued that the "basic unit of analysis must shift from a sociological family concept [the physically bounded household] to a psychological-affective transactional definition of the family network" (p. 1098). In other words, it is now more fruitful for researchers to consider the family dynamics as opposed to an emphasis only on family structure. Emphasis on family structure has resulted in using the deficit model to describe variant family forms. When traditional nuclear families are considered the ideal, deviations from this family form have resulted in viewing single-parent families in a negative, pathological way. An important shift must occur from considering only family structure to also exploring family dynamics and how family process can contribute to healthy family functioning. Different questions must be posed by researchers in order to capture the essence of family dynamics in variant family forms. The question must be asked in order to ascertain the essence of family life and the strength within single-parent families: What is the actual lived experience of family life? It is suggested that more than ever the family must endeavor to provide emotional support for family members. Society is becoming more impersonal because of urbanization, industrialization, and increased mobility, thus placing more strain on the family to meet one another's emotional needs (Spanier & Thompson, 1984).

It is postulated that future changes for the family will not be seen in its structural arrangements or functional tasks. Changes will occur most likely in the dynamics of family interactions. Family relationships will change over time, and this
will require family members to act toward each other differently, to meet each other’s needs better than they have in the past, to communicate better about those needs, and to change habits to perform more adequately the familial function of emotional support. (Spanier & Thompson, 1984, p. 17)

Nurses have been providing care to families for years even though family nursing care per se was not in vogue (Ham & Chamings, 1983). More recently there has been an increased emphasis by many nurses on the family as a unit of care and a significant context for an individual’s health (Moriarty, 1990).

The health care system is becoming more community based; consequently, it is necessary to study a family in its social context to determine the resources necessary to assist healthy family functioning. The impact of one’s social context, especially human relationships with family members and others, has a powerful influence in meeting the demands of living (Pearson, 1990).

In Phillips’ (1990) essay on “The Different Views of Health,” he stressed that “health involves all people” because “all people are interconnected” (p. 103). Phillips further argued that the “manifestations of the wholeness of health go beyond the biopsychosocial aspects of a person to the interconnectedness of people” (p. 103). It is of the utmost importance that nurse researchers move beyond the traditional view of health and illness and study people experiencing their “sense of interconnectedness with others, and specifically how health emerges from a mutual process” (p. 103).

With the increased interest in family nursing, family research has emerged as an important area for nursing science. Consequently, nurse researchers are
faced with the formidable task of measurement relative to the family as a whole rather than the sum of its parts. Some problems have been encountered with using quantitative designs in family research: that is, there is disagreement on what constitutes family research; methods available to operationalize family concepts are few; there is limited evidence of the validity of family assessment tools; and there are limited quantitative measures that reflect norms for different populations (Moriarty, 1990). Gilliss (1989) recognized that one’s understanding of family nursing research is in the infancy stage and “we are not sufficiently prepared to experiment” (p. 45). Prior to quantitative family studies, nurse researchers must understand and delineate concepts central to family nursing. Gilliss (1991) argued that there are barriers that impede family concept development in family nursing because nurse researchers do not clearly identify the unit of analysis. It is of utmost importance to identify clearly what is an individual perspective in contrast to a family perspective. She further elaborated that data collection and analytic techniques in family research are primitive and need refinement.

Qualitative approaches to family research are advocated by Moriarty (1990) when the goal of research is “to discover or to explore family processes, relationships or characteristics” (p. 3). Furthermore, she believed that qualitative approaches generate rich data around the subjective experiences of families, which lead to increased understanding of family dynamics. Contextual variables contribute to the richness of the data. Finally, she postulated that the outcomes of qualitative studies are important for family nursing theory development.
Research Questions

An understanding of the ways in which families manage difficult life events is crucial for community health, family, and parent-child nurses who care for women and children who face a variety of crises as a result of separation and/or divorce. For the most part, current knowledge and research about the transition from a nuclear family to a single-parent family constellation explicate the negative aspects of this life experience. Knowledge is limited in terms of how single-parent families creatively redefine who and what they are and how they navigate successfully the transition from a dual-parent family system to a single-parent family system. Moreover, there is little known about the internal strength of the female-headed, single-parent family following separation and divorce.

The research questions for this study are as follows: From the perspective of school-aged children (8 to 15 years old) and their mothers who have been separated or divorced for 2 or more years, (a) what is the lived experience of strength within single-parent families, (b) what do single-parent mothers perceive as their family strength in everyday life, and (c) what do children perceive as their family strength in everyday life?
CHAPTER II
THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Introduction

The major thrust of phenomenological research is to question what a phenomenon is really like: What is it like to experience the phenomenon? Van Manen (1990) stated, "To truly question something is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being" (p. 43).

Furthermore, it is important to ground the study by asking: How does the current form of knowledge contribute to the question? How do the current theories/concepts gloss over one’s understanding of the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990)? In contrast to Van Manen’s view, Cobb and Hagemaster (1987) suggested that in phenomenological investigations, the literature review is delayed until analysis of the data is completed. In this way, they argued that the study is truly grounded in the data. Consequently, conducting a literature review prior to the collection of data necessitates increased bracketing on the part of the researcher; that is, a researcher’s theoretical and experiential beliefs about the phenomenon must be held in abeyance by the researcher so that the research focuses on the lived experience of the participants. For the purpose of this study, a preliminary review of the literature was conducted; then a secondary review was completed.
following interpretation of the data.

Of interest to me was the nature of the lived experience of single-parent families headed by females and the support these families need to define who and what they are and how they function successfully in this family system. Personal interest in families has evolved over the years (a) as a community nurse visiting various types of families in a community health setting, (b) as a family nurse practitioner in a family practice clinic in charge of families with multiple problems, and (c) as a professor of family nursing in a nursing educational program. An undergraduate nursing student recently queried if single-parent families were “really families.” The question at first was amazing but upon further reflection, it proved to be understandably reasonable. My personal and professional experiences have influenced my assumptions about the strength of single-parent families; consequently, these assumptions are described in this chapter.

The review of literature is intended to provide a theoretical discussion pertaining to the single-parent family’s contextual lives. In this chapter, a feminist analysis of the family, a discussion of family system adjustment following divorce, and a discussion of family strengths are provided.

**Personal Assumptions**

My assumptions originated from previous clinical work with families; evaluation of students’ clinical work with families in their community health rotation; work associated with a telephone crisis line; and numerous experiences with family, personal friends, and colleagues. Personally, I was raised on a farm
in a traditional, nuclear, two-parent family in which my mother was always at home. In fact, I cannot remember a day when she was not home after school. The aroma of hot cinnamon rolls or doughnuts greeted me as I entered my home. My four siblings and I immediately sat down to “lunch” before supper. My mother not only nourished us with food but also paid attention to our emotional needs. My father maintained a cool but loving distance; he was there when we needed him. I believe that this is a different scenario from what many families experience today.

Today, there is a variety of family structures; some of these families hold on to traditional patterns; some establish new forms. Whatever their form, families define who one is, give one strength, and sometimes cause one pain. Families can be a number of things: a haven in a troubled world, a jail for imprisoned minds, or a garden in which one can grow and develop.

The old formula of husbands as breadwinners and protectors and wives as nurturers is dying a slow death. Women are entering the work force in record numbers. Consequently, more than ever, families must juggle love, marriage, careers, children, and recreational pursuits. From my own experience as a telephone crisis worker, I perceive that many families find it stressful to deal with this juggling act. Many see divorce as a way out of these stressful situations.

There is little doubt that single-parent families undergo stress related to the major loss of a parent and a spouse from the family. Despite the many challenges including economic deprivation, social and legal challenges, and family system
reorganization, there are some families that may and in fact do endure and triumph over their difficulties.

Family members’ lost dreams and hopes must be worked through before the family can move on to a new level of organization and functioning. Healing processes may occur if the family perceives that to remain in destructive family relationships is detrimental to family life and child development. Conflictual relationships within the family contribute to decreased mental health of the family. However, after divorce, the mental health of the family may improve if mothers and children face and adjust to the everyday challenges ahead of them.

It is my assumption that single-parent mothers must have individual strength in order to meet the challenges of self-development and family development. In their growth towards a new self, a self without a husband, these women forge ahead finding a new identity. Forging ahead embodies looking back and seeing ahead to a new identity for themselves and the family. Rather than pining for the persons they once were and the past family structure, they move on to a new identity. Time is spent pursuing one’s purpose in life independently without denying the needs of children. Reaching their goals in life enhances the development of the entire family.

To find one’s strength, one must go within to a quiet place, beneath the surface to a deep place, and beyond to a mysterious place. It is through these inner experiences that women who have strength discover themselves, find meaning in relationships, seek the beauty of nature, and seek the mystery of life.
During times of solitude and introspection, women find their own truth, their authentic being. Strength comes with the realization of feeling okay about being alone and yet being connected to others in meaningful ways. There is a sense of being connected and available yet still experiencing one's separateness.

There is an openness to life with the ability to integrate loss, uncertainty, pain, and vulnerability, as well as the joy and beauty of life. Openness embodies valuing the inward life and the outward life, the subjective life and the objective life, and the concrete life as well as the mystery of life.

Women who have strength meet life with self-determination, a trusting that they can make it on their own. Making it on their own does not mean that these women cannot ask for assistance with financial, social, and emotional difficulties. For the single-parent family to function smoothly, support from outside sources is nurtured. Support from extended family, friends, and relatives has a positive influence on the single-parent family. Love, empathy, and support can empower single-parent families to feel good about themselves and improve their self-esteem.

If family resources are not available, strong single-parent families will often reach out to outside resources. Organizations such as Parents Without Partners, special religious groups, and other resources can fulfill support needs. For children, organizations such as Aunts at Large, Uncles at Large, Boy Scouts, and Girl Scouts can provide modelling and support.

Relationships and communication patterns within single-parent families can improve, thus creating an atmosphere of trust and respect. Mothers recognize that
children are human beings with their own thoughts and feelings, and in doing so they truly hear what children have to say. When mothers demonstrate respect for their children, chances are the children will return this respect. Listening is crucial so that family members feel cared for and loved. Taking time to listen gives the message that the individual is trying to understand and values that person.

Children may feel valued when their mothers teach them to negotiate their way through life. Instead of demanding obedience and imposing controls in an authoritarian way, mothers approach decision making in a democratic way. In other words, children have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. Family conflict is recognized and is dealt with through negotiation.

Sharing emotional crises within a family may permit single parents and children to create a special bond. Children may be given responsibilities in single-parent families; thus, they may feel needed and significant because of their contributions. Conquering challenges together as a family may allow a family to explore the meaning of human life in ways that are not always available in dual-parent families.

**Rethinking the Concept of Families**

Within the last decade, the family has become an important social and political issue. With the growing number of divorces, the increase in single-parent families and people living alone, and the escalation of women in the work force with young children, some scholars are claiming the family is in crisis (Thorne, 1982). The family may be under siege, but does this mean crisis? Is the family
disintegrating as some suggest, or does it still constitute the strongest support system in society? These are questions that challenge defenders of the conventional nuclear family and others who may advocate a new vision of family life.

Scanzoni (1983) identified the conceptualization of society as a major factor in analyzing family forms. The conventional view claims that society is a system of clearly defined roles: Husbands are the major breadwinners for families, and wives are responsible for the care of the home and children in a well-functioning system. It is essential that individuals are versed in these roles and abide by them. In contrast, the progressive view is described as a society that has powerful interest groups who negotiate for their preferred family patterns, which, in turn, promote the goals of the group. The conventional view is characterized by stability and permanence, and deviation from this view is not tolerated. On the other hand, the progressive view is one that is flexible, and anything that makes the system rigid is reduced or eliminated. In the next section of this dissertation, these two social perspectives are used to rethink the nature of the family in contemporary society.

The conventional or traditional model of the family, which has prevailed throughout the 20th century, has come into question, particularly from a feminist perspective. Pogrebin (1983) argued that depending on what theorist one reads the family was in transition from "an institutional to a companionship form, from an economic to an affectional unit, from a child-centered to a couple-centered entity, from one lifelong bond to serial connections, from asymmetrical to
quasi-equalitarian roles, from kinship groups to extended families to nuclear to reconstituted families" (p. 22). Moreover, Pogrebin contended that only feminists have asked the salient question: “Is the family an inherently oppressive institution?” (p. 22). Feminists are united in the belief that women are oppressed, devalued, and exploited and changes are required to improve the status of women (Jaggar, 1977; Walker & Thompson, 1984). However, there are conflicting views about what needs to be changed and the means to accomplish these changes in order to improve the status of women.

Friedan (1963), a forerunner of the women’s movement, noted that women in the 1950s and 1960s were oppressed within the nuclear family in isolated suburbia. According to the feminine mystique, women’s sole identity was determined by being a wife and a mother, not a person in her own right. Voices within women were saying, “I want something more than my husband and my children and my home” (p. 32). To break free from their desperate existence, women were urged to create a new life plan with satisfying work but incorporating the family. Thus, the first stage of the women’s movement was focused on equal opportunity for jobs and education. It was believed that “women have to experience at least the beginning of equality in the world before they can trade off that supreme, excessively burdening power in the family” (p. 100).

In the second stage of feminism, Friedan (1981) claimed the conceptualization of the family as a new feminist frontier in which no one can depend on the old nuclear family to meet one’s needs for love, support, and
nurture even though one still has those needs. Friedan called for new types of family in which equality is based on the ideas of caring and equal partnership. Men were challenged to free themselves from stressful sex roles and to make choices about the nurturing of children and for cooperation in the home as well as the workplace.

Women's oppression was rooted in a patriarchal society, claimed Millett (1969) in her theory of sexual politics. She defined sexual politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group is controlled by another" (p. 31). She saw the family as patriarchy's chief institution and the mechanism by which patriarchy was maintained. Within the family, Millett argued, patriarchy was fortified by romantic love, which perpetuated women's economic dependence on men. In turn, this economic dependence reinforced male power. To break out of this pattern, she advocated for a cultural revolution to raise social consciousness to give way to new structures and behaviors.

According to Firestone (1970), the heart of women's oppression is her childbearing and child-rearing roles, which make them dependent on males for their survival. The reproductive differences between the sexes result in an unequal distribution of power, which leads to an oppressive class and caste system. Her solution to the dialectic of sex is to do away with the family in order to free women and children from oppression.

Chodorow (1978), like Firestone (1970), saw women's reproductive capacities and the sexual division of labor as sources of oppression for women.
The family is the central element in the sex/gender system. Within this system, mothers are more involved in interpersonal, affective relationships than fathers, consequently producing a division of psychological capacities in daughters and sons. Chodorow (1978) argued that women, as mothers, produce daughters with mothering capacities and the desire to mother. These capacities and needs are built into and grow out of the mother-daughter relationship itself. By contrast, women as mothers (and men as nonmothers) produce sons whose nurturant capacities and needs have been systemically curtailed and repressed. (p. 7)

In other words, Chodorow’s explanation of the differences between gender identity formation is that a male’s identity is tied closely to separation and individuation. Males’ early nurturing is experienced from the mother, someone from the opposite sex. Boys, in defining themselves as masculine, separate the mother from themselves, thus curtailing their sense of empathic ties. Correspondingly, girls, in identifying themselves as female, experience themselves like their mothers, thus coalescing the experience of attachment with the process of identity formation. Women are then prepared for affective relationships within the family, whereas men are prepared to work in the public sphere with little preparation for the affective family role. The solution proposed by Chodorow includes the full participation of fathers in the care of their children.

Feminine voices of the 1960s and 1970s were somewhat negative, defiant, and angry with a diverse range of reactions. Janeway (1974) believed that the
Women's Movement began not so long ago, as protest, and many of its strongest statements are negative, because they arise from dissatisfaction with past standards which have become unrealistic today. To those that are still satisfied with the status quo, these statements seem to be attacks on the way things are, and the Women's Movement is consequently said to be turning women away from marriage and motherhood, and even normal heterosexual relationships. (p. 77)

However, the realities of everyday life changed the occupational role for women and also the sexual behavior acceptable for women. The women's movement was seen as a way to respond to the changes that were taking place in society. Some of the changes taking place were connected with the increased ability of women to find employment and support themselves. The changes accounted for substantial increases in the labor force of women of different marital statuses and ages. With this accomplishment, women gained substantial independence, which paved the way for their freedom to choose a marriage partner, to abstain from marriage, or to end a marriage that had become unbearable.

The proportion of never-married and the age at which marriage takes place also has risen dramatically. Women have decided to have smaller families, and some have decided to remain childless. There has been a sharp increase in a variety of family forms, from cohabitation to commuter marriages. However, the most striking change has been the upsurge in divorce, single parenthood, and remarriage (Janeway, 1974; Scanzoni et al., 1989).

Is it possible that the feminists' critique of oppressive family life espoused during the 1960s and 1970s still resonates within the lives of women and children today? Flax (1982) provided a thought-provoking critique on this question. She
argued that even though Friedan (1963, 1981), Millett (1969), and Firestone (1970) agreed that women are oppressed when they are defined in terms of their sexual roles, these authors did not agree on the source of the definition, on the cause, or on the means to overcome the oppression. They did not consider the differences among women such as class or race or different family variations.

Flax (1982) faulted the aforementioned feminists for having abstract notions of consciousness. For example, she stated that Friedan (1963, 1981) did not explain how the “feminine mystique keeps women from being persons” or how one “achieves fulfillment by oneself, outside of relations with others” (p. 230). Nor did Firestone (1970) explain how biology is the determining factor in the destiny of women.

However, Flax (1982) gave Firestone (1970) credit for including children in her discussion about the oppressive nature of the family. She argued, however, that Firestone’s discussion of children neglected to take “unconscious and psychosexual development seriously” (p. 231). She further argued that Firestone did not recognize the special needs of children, except for a short period of physical dependence. Firestone’s notion of children suggested that they are “fully rational, theorizing adults, able to carry out sophisticated political analysis of their parents’ relationship by the age of three” (p. 231). It is questionable whether Firestone had any understanding of the maturation process of children or children’s experience of their family experience or their family situation.

In summary, the theories purported by Friedan (1963, 1981), Millett
(1969), Firestone (1970), and Chodorow (1978) do not provide a deep, rich understanding of women’s or children’s experience within the family. “The key to understanding humans lay [sic] in deciphering how they, in their words and actions, attach meanings to the object of their concern” (Gubrium & Holstein, 1990, p. 9). The meaning that single-parent mothers and their children assign to their interpersonal relations must be understood in order to appreciate fully the challenges that single-parent families face and the strength needed to live fulfilling lives.

**From Divorce to Single-Parent Family: A Transition**

The study of human experiences as they relate to health is the substantive domain of nursing science. Meleis (1991), in describing the concepts central to the domain of nursing, identified the study of health within life transitions as points of inquiry for nurses. She suggested that nurses work with people who are “experiencing transition, anticipating transition, or completing the act of transition” (p. 103). Transitions are developmental, situational, or health/illness events that require a change in health status, role relationships, expectations, or abilities (Meleis, 1991).

Separations are a significant part of the human condition, beginning with physical separation from one’s mother’s body at birth and ending with death itself. Each attachment and detachment encountered is a significant aspect of a human being’s evolving life (Dlugokinski, 1977). Divorce is a significant developmental
and situational separation that affects many lives; in particular, it affects all family members’ and social network members’ relationships. Moreover, divorce represents a process of dramatic redefinitions of family relationships rather than termination of these relationships (Pais & White, 1979).

It is not beneficial to view divorce as dissolution of the nuclear family or as “family in transition to another two-parent binuclear household, but rather as a family in transition to a different structure or organization, a bona fide family form” (Herz Brown, 1989, p. 371) that results in a redefinition of family relationships.

Because Weltner (1982) values the intact nuclear family, he painted a pathetic picture of the female-headed, single-parent family. He described all single-parent mothers at risk, “beset by such a raft of problems that helplessness became a way of life”; the lack of validation from the husband left the mother as a “less effective and less powerful leader of the family,” and the demands such as work, household maintenance, and child care dictated that “some of these demands will be met poorly, if at all” (p. 204). He described mothers as unable to provide support to their children as they were unable to set limits, provide advice, and nurture their children. Finally, when children’s services are marshalled, the role of children also was described in a negative way. Children in female-headed homes are compared to Cinderella in the sense that they are “overworked, undervalued and unsupported in the dealings with siblings” (p. 205). Other children’s roles Weltner described are that of scapegoat, parents’ confidant, a
target of mother's wrath, and the recipient of unfinished business between mother and her parents. No doubt single-parent families are stressed as they redefine who they are as a family, but the aforementioned view of the single, female-headed family only creates a sense of powerlessness as they deal with the disruption in their lives. Furthermore, the above description of the single-parent family does not give an accurate understanding of single-parent families based on women's and children's experiences; rather, it is perceived by those who do not have the experience, or it is filtered through the experience of what it is like from a two-parent family perspective.

Single-parent families experience a dramatic transition in family definition, organization, and relationships (Ahrons, 1979; Bohannan, 1970; Pais & White, 1979; Textor, 1989). To counteract the prevailing view of divorce as family dissolution, Ahrons (1980a) proposed a binuclear family system whereby the maternal and paternal households become the center of the child's "family orientation" (p. 439). In her study of 41 divorced spouses, Ahrons (1980b) found differences in the way divorced spouses coparented. Some were flexible and were able to work out satisfactory arrangements for their children; others needed more structure to avoid conflict; and yet other families required mediation to negotiate responsibilities in order to implement decisions for child care. She concluded that literature on divorce was derived mainly from clinical work; role models of successful divorced families were lacking.

The areas of family redefinition delineated by Bohannan (1970) are six
different experiences of separation. They are as follows: (a) emotional divorce, which centers around the breakup of the marriage; (b) legal divorce, which is based on grounds; (c) economic divorce, which deals with the settlement of money and property; (d) coparental divorce, which deals with legal custody of children; (e) community divorce, which marks changes in supportive networks; and (f) psychic divorce, which is associated with the development of autonomy. These changes do not necessarily happen in any particular sequence or intensity, but Bohannan believed they are areas to consider when dealing with divorced families.

Following a process model, Herz Brown (1989) conceptualized divorce as three distinct phases that included the aftermath, realignment, and stabilization of the family system. During the process of stabilizing as a single-parent family, family members undergo many disruptions in their lives as additional tasks are added. However, Herz Brown concluded that many families fail to reach a new form; but, if the family restabilizes, it can function well if the mother decides to marry or not.

Children's definitions of their reconstituted families go beyond biological and legal definitions (Gross, 1986; Klee, Schmidt, & Johnson, 1989). In an anthropological study, children of divorce defined their families in flexible ways to encompass biological and legal criteria, as well as relationships with people who were not related in biological or legal ways (Klee et al., 1989). Divorce encompasses changes in family relationships, which have been given little attention. Klee et al. concurred and stated that "the impact of new family forms
on the socialization of children, in general, and particularly on the way that children learn to conceptualize the family needs greater attention” (p. 111).

**Divorce: Family System Adjustment**

The events of separation and divorce potentially lead to major changes that produce considerable stress for families. Next to death of one’s spouse, divorce may initiate the most severe demands for the reorganization of family life (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). After divorce, mothers generally gain custody of the children, with the exception of unusual circumstances (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). Glick (1979) predicted that by 1990 one half of all children would spend some time in a female-headed family. Divorced women with children must face a number of interrelated challenges involving the resolution of emotional and pragmatic issues, establishing effective roles and relationships with family members, and development of new interests and social relationships (Mandell, 1988).

In order to meet these challenges and become a one-parent family, Herz Brown (1989) suggested that one must resolve issues during the aftermath of divorce and during the realignment and stabilization of the family system. During the process of stabilizing as a single-parent household, numerous tasks must be accomplished and difficulties must be overcome. However, she believed that many families do not stabilize successfully in their new family form. Weiss (1979) purported that it takes from 2 to 4 years to recover from the effects of divorce.
Adult Emotional Adjustment

The 1st year following separation or divorce can be “as devastating as any natural disaster” (Herz Brown, 1989, p. 374). In the past, researchers examined divorce from a pathogenic perspective linking marital dissolution with psychopathology, with marital status linked to mental disorder (Kraus, 1979). In Bloom, White, and Asher’s (1978) review of studies, it was pointed out that divorced people had twice the suicide rate of married people, more car accidents, higher death rates due to physical diseases, and more abuse of alcohol. This pathogenic view of divorce has been criticized, as positive outcomes of divorce were not considered (Kraus, 1979). More recently, the adjustment to divorce has been conceptualized as a transitional crisis (Ahrons, 1980b) that initially may produce considerable pain, turmoil, and disorganization of family members. However, the successful mastery of this crisis can have growth-producing effects as family members develop new capacities to adjust (Nelson, 1985).

Marital separation can precipitate intense and complex emotional reactions. Weiss (1979) provided a description of divorce adjustment from a clinical perspective of 150 recently separated or divorced people who attended educational seminars. Following separation, he found that couples suffered from separation distress, which encompassed a number of common emotional problems. These emotional problems included pining for the spouse accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fearfulness, and intense anger at the spouse, tempered with ambivalence,
alternating at times with euphoria and relief. He claimed that separation distress fades with the passage of time; however, when separation distress dissipated, loneliness may set in if no other satisfying relationship took place. Hetherington et al. (1978) agreed that, with time, attachment and conflict decrease, but anger and resentment are sustained longer by mothers compared to fathers.

Other researchers disagreed with Weiss (1979) that loss of attachment fully described separation distress; other changes and stressors such as economic, social, and parental spheres are known to relieve and/or exacerbate feelings of distress above and beyond those due to the loss of attachment (Brown, Felton, Whiteman, & Manela, 1980). Spanier and Casto (1979) refuted the notion that continued attachment to the former spouse is a major cause of emotional problems that follow separation. In their study, they concluded that “there is a substantial minority of ex-spouses for whom attachment or its loss presents no major problem” (p. 220). Berman (1988) also suggested that ongoing attachment is different conceptually than emotional distress following divorce. He drew the conclusion that coping strategies that alleviated emotional distress appeared to be less useful in reducing ongoing attachment.

The whole process of separation is experienced differently for women and men according to a study by Chiriboga and Cutler (1977). A sample of 252 men and women were interviewed about the difficulties and advantages associated with the stages of divorce they had experienced. Men appeared more vulnerable than women to the stresses of separation, especially with emotional issues. It was
concluded that men are likely to deny their emotional feelings, whereas women are more in touch with their emotional issues and do not use convenient avenues of escape. Women experience an emotional low more quickly but also resolve their emotional difficulties more rapidly.

In another study by Chiriboga, Roberts, and Stein (1978), psychological well-being was explored in a sample of 309 men and women aged 20 to 79. Men were significantly less happy than women, and the older respondents reported greater unhappiness than the younger respondents. Gray (1978) reported that there was a general improvement in the mental health of 126 male and female separated and divorced participants 6 months following her original study. Participants in her study had developed more functional time patterns, were making autonomous decisions, and had increased feelings of self-esteem and self-worth.

Some of the 1980s studies on divorce transition examined not only the distress caused by divorce but also relief, personal growth, and coping mechanisms individuals used. Spanier and Thompson’s (1983) study of 205 recently separated individuals found that, in some cases, relief, a novel finding, also may be considered a change after the dissolution of a marriage. These researchers distinguished between the distressed group and the relieved group. They noted that the distressed group had “a low level of educational achievement,” reported “that they were subjected to strong disapproval of the divorce by spouse’s parents and friends,” recalled “a high level of extramarital ties and task participation in the marriage,” and were “recovering from a spouse-initiated divorce” (p. 44). In
contrast, the relieved group recalled "a low level of consensus and harmony during the final months of marriage," reported "a high likelihood of having postponed the divorce because of their children," and showed "a tendency to have considered an alternative dating partner" (p. 46). Buehler and Langenbrunner (1987) also found that recently divorced people experience personal growth and relief despite the occurrence of negative experiences.

Researchers have predicted several variables that enhance coping in divorced single parents. Pett (1982) identified the following predictors for successful social adjustment of divorced single parents: (a) subjective feelings of well-being and the absence of distress, (b) the amount of income collected from welfare, (c) the quality of relationships with significant others, (d) family status, and (e) social support and remarriage of the custodial parents. Another study by Propst, Pardington, Ostrom, and Watkins (1986) indicated that the phase of divorce and/or separation, numbers and ages of children less than 10 years old, the style of coping, and educational level have an effect on the adjustment of single mothers.

**Divorce and Child Adjustment**

It has been documented in the literature that children of divorce are subject to cognitive, behavioral, and affective problems within the 1st year of separation/divorce. An influential research project carried out in the early 1970s provides a comprehensive understanding of children's adjustment to parental divorce (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975, 1976). Sixty
families with 131 children between 2½ and 18 years old were studied intensively shortly after separation 1, 5, and 10 years later. The sample was predominantly young, white, and middle-to-upper class and was drawn from a normal population.

The majority of children of all age groups was reported to have significant psychosocial problems following parental divorce, and these problems varied according to the child’s age. Youngest children were whiny, fearful, and aggressive, exhibited regressive behavior, and were possessive. Preschool children did not appear to understand the divorce and blamed themselves for their parents’ separation. School-aged children experienced mixed feelings of sadness, anxiety, and anger. Many of these children had conflicts of divided loyalty and wished that their parents would reconcile.

Magrab (1978) compared the separation and divorce process to the loss of the parent through death. Adjustment to divorce is similar to the grieving process as divorce “stimulates feelings of separation anxiety mixed with feelings of helplessness and rejection” (p. 237). Other symptoms of irritability, loss of appetite, and poor sleeping patterns may occur as well. These short-term adjustments may be good or bad; however, they are not necessarily predictions of long-term outcomes.

Another factor believed to be important is the length of time since separation/divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that the child’s greatest adjustment problems occurred during the 1st year after divorce; however, some children 2 years following divorce had increased behavioral problems. They
concluded that divorce has short-term effects, as well as chronic effects in some cases.

Children's responses to parental divorce may vary with the gender of the child. Studies of children show more maladjustment problems for boys compared to girls in divorced families (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980); other researchers (Kurdek, Blisk, & Slessky, 1981) found no gender differences. The results of a meta-analysis of studies dealing with the long-term effects of parental divorce for adult well-being does not support the widely held contention that parental divorce has more detrimental consequences for males than for females (Amato & Keith, 1991).

There is a growing consensus in the literature that interparental conflict affects children's adjustment (Emery, 1982; Jacobson, 1978; Luepnitz, 1979; Nichols, 1984; Oppawsky, 1989; Walsh & Stolberg, 1989). In a study by Oppawsky (1989), 65% of the children suggested that "one thing their parents could do to reduce the divorce trauma on them was to stop fighting" (p. 151). Children's reactions to parental fighting were increased crying, sadness, anger, anxiety, hate and hostility toward the parents, shame due to parental behavior, and lowered grades in school. However, these children noted that after the parents moved apart, they were less subject to the parental conflict. Hetherington et al. (1978) found that a "conflict-ridden intact family is more deleterious to family members than a stable home situation in which parents are divorced" (p. 175).
Pragmatic Issues and Financial Concerns

An important concern after marital separation/divorce is the economic concerns of female-headed families. Previous research supports a picture of downward income mobility for divorced mothers. Lowered income also precipitates changes in moves to more affordable housing (Brandwein, Brown, & Fox, 1974) or moves to neighborhoods that are unsafe but close to work or day care (Colletta, 1983). Geographic moves may induce additional stress into an already stressful situation (Asher & Bloom, 1983).

Generally, the 1st year following divorce, the lives of single parents are more disorganized compared to intact families. Hetherington et al. (1978) described erratic household routines with respect to mealtimes, bedtime, and household routines.

Mother/Child Relationships

Data from longitudinal studies provide rich descriptions of changes occurring in parent-child relationships in single-parent families after divorce. According to some scholars, there is a deterioration in the parent-child relationships, particularly in the 1st year after divorce (Hetherington et al., 1978; Wallerstein, 1983). Divorced parents compared to married parents are less affectionate, make fewer maturity demands, are more authoritarian, and are inconsistent in their disciplinary measures. In addition, divorced mothers use more negative sanctions particularly with sons. Children of single parents contribute to this vicious cycle of communication by exhibiting more negative behaviors 1 year
after divorce compared with children from intact families (Hetherington et al., 1978).

Divorced custodial mothers experience powerlessness and stress in regard to their children (Worell & Garret-Fulks, 1983). Herz Brown (1989) stated, “A mother’s sense of powerlessness is proportional to her perception of the vacuum created by the father’s absence from the home” (p. 376). Initially, the mother may try to overcome her incompetency by pulling the father, children, or grandparents into the empty space. This may provide temporary assistance, but, in the long run, this is dysfunctional for the family.

In summary, there is a voluminous amount of research indicating that women and children experience short-term adaptation problems following separation and divorce. However, much of the research has a pathogenic orientation as generally negative outcomes are emphasized. Many of the studies in this area have examined clinical populations, have compared single-parent families who are in a crisis with happy intact families, have not properly controlled for numerous contextual variables such as socioeconomic status and the amount of time elapsed since separation/divorce, have used cross-sectional designs, and have used linear unidirectional models accompanied by singular static variables. Single methods only provide a partial understanding of the construct and possibly provide a misleading understanding of the construct.

Living in a single-parent family is a complex human phenomenon. It deserves an inquiry model that considers multiple meanings that women and
children may attribute to their functioning within the single-parent family. A deeper, richer understanding of the single-parent family situation can be achieved if respondents' meanings and contexts are grounded in their descriptions of lived experience. Living in a single-parent family system is not limited to a physical reality, a reality that are things per se, something that is context free; rather, it is a context dependent, situational entity that is socially constructed. Linear models of cause-and-effect will not tap the fullness and depth of the construct.

The two-parent family is held as the benchmark family in most of Western society. According to a survey of 1,505 psychologists conducted by the American Psychological Association, the decline of the nuclear family is seen as the greatest threat to mental health in America (Staff, 1991). The rising divorce rate and the increasing numbers of single parents are "change[s] that may be viewed as threatening to the status quo and as requiring condemnation as pathological" (Nelson, 1985, p. 133). Instead of condemning the rise in marital separation/divorce, it would be useful to conceptualize this phenomenon as a stressful life event that requires adaptation with both negative and positive outcomes for family members (Nelson, 1985). Further research is needed that examines both the positive and negative consequences of marital separation and divorce for the single-parent family.

**Family Strength**

There is a paucity of research that highlights healthy functioning of female-headed families after separation and postdivorce adjustment. However,
contributions toward understanding the strength of two-parent families are prevalent in the literature.

Characteristics of healthy, two-parent families vary throughout the literature. Otto (1973), a pioneer in the study of family strengths, proposed four major strengths: (a) provision of emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of the family; (b) effective communication patterns; (c) reliable support systems; and (d) constructive problem solving and crisis management. Stinnett and his research colleagues also studied family strengths (Stinnett, Chester, & DeFrain, 1979; Stinnett & DeFrain, 1981; Stinnett, DeFrain, King, Knaub, & Rowe, 1981; Stinnett, Sanders, DeFrain, & Parkhurst, 1982). They delineated six characteristics that strong families share in common: the expression of appreciation by family members, spending quality time together, good communication patterns, a high degree of commitment to one another, a religious orientation, and the ability to handle crises effectively. Curran (1983) surveyed professionals who worked with families. She delineated 15 family traits that focus on how people relate to one another in a family system.

From a systems perspective, another group of researchers advanced a circumflex model based on the family dimensions of cohesion and adaptability to delineate healthy family functioning (Olson, Sprenkle, & Russell, 1979). They proposed that a balanced level of both cohesion and adaptability is the most functional for marital and family health. For example, too much cohesion or closeness can result in enmeshment, whereas too little cohesion can result in
disengagement of the family system. In regard to adaptability, too much change can lead to a chaotic system, whereas too little can lead to rigidity. Using the circumflex model as their theoretical guide in a ground-breaking study based on 1,140 married couples and families from 31 states, Olson et al. (1983) provided further understanding of family strengths from their study of families who were undergoing normal developmental changes. Important findings from this study are marital strengths including communication, conflict resolution, role relationship, and sexual relationship, whereas family pride, accord, and good parent-adolescent communication are considered important for family strength.

There is a dearth of knowledge about the strengths related to the single-parent family. Hanson (1986) recognized the need to study the single-parent family from a positive framework; however, she studied the single-parent family using dimensions previously identified in the research literature with healthy two-parent families. Fitting the single-parent family into existing models of family strengths of two-parent families is a limitation in the conception of the human condition. In contrast, Duffy (1984, 1989) conducted a qualitative research study to determine the relationship of mental well-being and the practice of primary prevention behaviors. Her research culminated in a theory of transcending options that described the family’s practice of preventive behaviors as a subset of the family’s life circumstances.

In summary, there is little research describing the healthy functioning of female-headed families with school-aged children 2 or more years following
separation/divorce. For the most part, analysis of the single-parent family functioning has been undertaken as a study of a deviation from the norm, because the norm has been arrived at by the study of the conventional nuclear family experience.

The divorce crisis may stimulate family growth and development in ways that are not available in the two-parent family system. Knowledge of the experience of successful change from a two-parent family to a one-parent family falls short. There is a need to describe the strength of single-parent families that may develop following separation and divorce.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter II illustrated how the current knowledge from a feminist perspective and a pathogenic view of the single-parent family glossed over the understanding of the complexity of family functioning within a single-parent family structure. Presently, there is a need to describe the strength of single-parent families that may develop following separation and divorce.

Phenomenology is a research design that explores the humanness of being in the world (Bergum, 1989). Family is a situation in which individuals live out their humanness and in which they are involved in a shared history, tradition and rituals, and a social network that they constitute or are constituted by. Phenomenology is best suited to go beyond the “taken for granted” in family life. Moreover, the task of phenomenology is to “uncover the meanings in everyday practice in such a way that they are not destroyed, distorted, decontextualized, trivialized, or sentimentalized” (Benner, 1985, p. 6).

The phenomenological research design is derived from the phenomenological philosophy and was selected for this study because it best answers the following questions: From the perspective of school-aged children (8
to 15 years old) and their mothers who have been separated or divorced for 2 or more years: (a) what is the lived experience of strength within single-parent families, (b) what do single-parent mothers perceive as their family strength in everyday life, and (c) what do children perceive as their family strength in everyday life?

Phenomenology: An Historical Perspective

Husserl (1962), the founding father of phenomenology as a philosophy, argued that the fundamental principal of phenomenology is the return to the "things themselves." This appeal to the things themselves signifies that philosophy must begin with the root of knowledge to the foundation of knowledge without presuppositions (Cohen, 1987). For Husserl, the roots of knowledge are found in the consciousness of the knowing subject to whom the phenomena appear (Spiegelberg, 1982). Thus, phenomenology means "the study of phenomena, as-phenomena-appear-through consciousness" (Thompson, 1990, p. 232).

Thompson (1990) suggested that many nurses still equate the phenomenological tradition with Husserl (1962). The concepts from the transcendental school of phenomenology that nurses continue to emphasize in their studies are (a) "an analysis of the subject and object-as-the-object-appears-through-consciousness, (b) an emphasis on bracketing or epoch as a method for suspending naive realist awareness, and (c) an emphasis on describing the full appearance of the object of inquiry" (p. 233).

Heidegger, a former student of Husserl (1962), primarily was concerned
with “Being and Time” because the meaning of “Being is ultimately bound up with the phenomenon of Time” (Heidegger, 1956, p. 34). For Heidegger, a human being is a Dasein, which means “being-in-the-world.” He believed that being-in-the-world meant that awareness was not totally subjective but rather intersubjective. The central question became, “What does it mean to be?” (Spinelli, 1989, p. 108). The focus of Heidegger’s fundamental wonder was Being, whereas consciousness was fundamental to Husserl’s philosophy.

Thompson (1990) provided an insightful analysis on the parting of the ways of the two philosophers. She argued that Heideggerian phenomenology rejects “the notion of subject and object and thus does not begin from a position that needs to show how we know an object” (p. 234). Thus, experience is not primarily knowledge. She continued to argue that “we have our experiences, or, rather they have us, prereflectively without any falling away of subject and object—we live our lives by experiencing the world and not primarily by ‘knowing’ it” (p. 234). Finally, the shift from consciousness to existence was a crucial development of hermeneutic phenomenology. Emphasis shifted from questions of knowing to questions of being or experiencing the world (Thompson, 1990).

Van Manen (1990), a contemporary phenomenologist, posited that human science research is a phenomenological and hermeneutical study of human existence: phenomenology because “it is a descriptive study of lived experience—which is mined for its meaning [and hermeneutical because] it is the interpretive study of the expressions and objectifications (texts) or lived experience
in the attempt to determine the meaning embodied in them” (p. 38). In essence, phenomenology is the description of experience and hermeneutics with interpretation of experience (Bergum, 1989).

According to Van Manen (1990), a slight shift has occurred in phenomenology, a shift from the epistemology of experience and perception to that of epistemology of language. Language is considered central to hermeneutics, as human experience is only possible because of language. Human understanding is possible because “we are born into linguistic communities, and the language(s) we speak are at once the conditions of new knowledge, opening us to new understandings, and the limits of what we can know or understand in the future” (Thompson, 1990, pp. 241-242).

The major task of phenomenology is to elucidate the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Parse, Coyne, & Smith, 1985). I wanted to find out what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced. Essence, described by Van Manen (1990), is “a linguistic construction, a description of a phenomenon” (p. 35). The linguistic description, as envisioned by Van Manen (1990), is both “holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39). A good description results in a “phenomenological nod” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 27) or, in other words, “Yes, of course, I can identify with that experience.”

The philosophical beliefs that underscore phenomenological inquiry are particularly compatible to study the lived experiences of strength within a single-
parent family. The family perceptions of strength are not a group perception but are a shared meaning that is influenced by the adults, as well as the children, in the family. The unique perceptions of individual members shape the resulting family perceptions of their strength. In the following section of this dissertation, some basic characteristics of phenomenological research are illustrated, which will be pertinent to the study of the lived experience of strength in single-parent families.

**Researching the Lived Experience**

The primary task of the phenomenological researcher is to orient the self to the question of meaning within the world of lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). To understand the lived experience from the participant’s perspective, the researcher must follow the rule of epoch that entails bracketing; that is, the researcher examines carefully, understands, and makes explicit his or her knowledge of the phenomenon and personal assumptions about the phenomenon. However, the researcher suspends the experiential and theoretical knowledge so that the research focuses on the lived experience of the participants. An openness on the part of the researcher is mandatory in order to allow for a reflective examination of the phenomenon under study. In this way, the fundamental nature of the phenomenon is revealed (Spinelli, 1989; Van Manen, 1990).

A second characteristic of the phenomenological method outlined by Spinelli (1989) is “Describe, don’t explain” (p. 17). Van Manen (1990) suggested that the participants must describe their experience, avoiding as much as possible “causal
explanations, generalizations, or abstract interpretations” (p. 64). It is helpful for
the participants to describe their experience from the “inside” (p. 64); for example,
descriptions should include feelings, moods, and emotions of the experience. As
the researcher interviews the participants, it is important to “stay close to the
experience as lived” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 67). Generally, participants should be
encouraged to speak with as much specificity as possible about their lived
experience. In order to get at the concreteness of the experience, Bergum (1989)
suggested the following question: “Can you give me an example?” that facilitates
in-depth, vivid description (p. 49).

Last, the final step outlined by Spinelli (1989) is the “rule of
horizontalization” or the “equalization rule” (p. 18). With this rule, Spinelli
cautioned phenomenological researchers to avoid placing any initial hierarchies of
importance on the data. Each piece of data should be treated initially as having
equal value or significance.

**Study Participants**

The participants in any phenomenological study are recruited from a
population living the experience of the phenomenon being studied (Parse et al.,
1985). The participants in this study were recruited from a group of single-parent
women and their school-aged children ranging from 8 to 15 years old. Colaizzi
(1978) suggested that experience with the investigated topic and the ability to
articulate the phenomenon should serve as criteria for selecting participants in a
phenomenological study.
Single-parent families who met the following eligibility criteria were recruited for this study: (a) mothers and child must be English speaking; (b) mothers must have joint or sole custody of the children or, if separated, the children must live with the mother the majority of the time; (c) family must include some children in the 8- to 15-year-old age bracket; (d) mothers and children must be healthy with no evident chronic or terminal illness; (e) mothers must be separated/divorced for at least 2 years; and (f) mothers and children must be able to articulate their family strength.

Colaizzi (1978) further suggested that the number of participants depends on various factors that must be tried out in each individual study. As such, it is difficult to determine at the beginning of the study the numbers of participants to recruit into the study. However, Parse (1990a) was more specific about participant selection when she suggested that 2 to 10 participants is an adequate number for a phenomenological study when redundancy of data is sought. In this study, 12 participants were included, 4 mothers and their 8 children.

Purposive- and snowball-sampling approaches for recruiting participants were utilized in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 1990). The snowball-sampling process began by requesting from key professional colleagues and personal friends their recommendations for referrals to single-parent families that fit the eligibility criteria. I was the final judge as to whether the participants could articulate their experience of strength within their single-parent family situation. In keeping with the snowball process and as the study progressed, I asked the
participants to recommend other participants who might share their experiences of strength. In addition, advertisements were placed in local newspapers, churches, and single-parent organizations requesting volunteers for the study (see Appendix A).

Purposive sampling ensures that as thorough data as feasible are collected—thorough in the sense of being explicit, illustrative, broad, and contextually rich. Informational adequacy was ensured by the completeness, relevance, and amount of the information obtained (Morse, 1989). Specifically, adequacy is achieved when the researcher experiences repeated redundancy in data elicited from the participants. In other words, I heard the same ideas and information about a phenomenon articulated repeatedly.

Because the ability to articulate the phenomenon experientially is so important to a phenomenological study, prior acceptance of the participants into the study was evaluated by way of a telephone conversation with the single-parent mothers using the aforementioned criteria as a guide. It was necessary that the participants had the experience of strength within their families and were willing to share and articulate this experience. In 2 cases, the male children were unwilling to participate; consequently, these 2 families were not included in the study.

**Generation of Data**

In-depth, informal, conversational interviews (Patton, 1990) are better suited for phenomenological studies as "conversations implicate a revealing of something in common," whereas more structured interviews involve "an effort to
gather information about perceptions or practices” (Carson, 1986, p. 78). During the dialogical interviews, the researcher must assume the stance of imaginative listening by being totally present to the participant. More specifically, the researcher must realize that the informants are more than a source of data; they are unique people. Only then can the full richness of the person be realized, as the researcher must listen with the totality of her or his being and with the entirety of her or his personality (Colaizzi, 1978). This means that the researcher accepts and affirms the participant so that the person can speak freely, openly, and honestly to the research question. In conversations, there are “profusion(s) of examples, ostensive references, and vivid recollections” (Carson, 1986, p. 81), which help bring forth unexpected insights.

To supplement data received from conversational interviews, other personal documents may be obtained. Journal writing, artwork, and poetry are other examples of data that offer additional meaning and depth and oftentimes can supplement depictions of the experience obtained from conversational interviews (Moustakas, 1990).

In the past, researchers have relied almost exclusively on adults as the primary informants for data concerning children’s thoughts and feelings (Faux, Walsh, & Deatrick, 1988). Children from the ages of 6 through 12 years old may be able to provide excellent information for qualitative researchers because of their cognitive and linguistic abilities and positive adult relationships. The interview method, combined with artwork, is an optimal way to study a child’s world
(Deatrick & Faux, 1989). As such, subjective data collection instruments are appropriate for use with children because there is a particular need to obtain inside the unique “culture of childhood” (Yamamoto, Soliman, Parsons, & Davies, 1987, p. 855) to understand how the world appears to children.

Recently, artwork has been used successfully in nursing studies to understand children’s perceptions of roles in physicians’ office visits (Baretich, Stephenson, & Igoe, 1989), children’s perceptions of their body image (Johnson, 1990), and siblings’ understanding of cancer (Rollins, 1990). The concept of the Kinetic Family Drawing provides information about how children perceive themselves in their family. Movement depicted in a child’s artwork helps mobilize a child’s feelings not only as related to self-concept but also in the area of interpersonal relations (Rollins, 1990). Johnson (1990) also concurred with Rollins by suggesting that children’s drawings may be a “useful peephole into the complex nature of children’s feelings” (p. 16).

**Interviews with Single-Parent Mothers**

In-depth, informal, face-to-face conversational interviews were conducted with 4 single-parent mothers in a mutually agreed-upon location, which included the participants’ homes and my home. Prior to the conversational interview, the participants were asked to respond to a demographic questionnaire administered by me (see Appendix B). Each conversational interview was audiotaped and transcribed verbatim after receiving permission from the mothers of the study (see Appendix C). There was no set time limit placed on the conversations with the
mothers. According to Moustakas (1990), the conversations are not “ruled by the clock but by inner experiential time” (p. 38). The dialogue is completed when the participants have the opportunity to finish their story to a point of natural closing. However, in this study, I made individual judgments as to the termination of the conversation by considering the mother’s level of fatigue, boredom, and data collected. For example, in 1 case, I lost the mother’s attention, and she appeared to be tired; thus, the tape recorder was turned off for a short break. The mother declined a second interview, so the interview was completed after a short break. The interviews ranged in length from 1½ to 3 hours.

Conversational interviews began with some social chit chat to establish trust and comfort between me and the participant. Initially, I asked the participants to talk in a general manner about their experience of strength within their single-parent family. Van Manen (1990) suggested that it is desirable to stay close to the phenomenon as it is lived; therefore, it may be necessary to become concrete. In this manner the informants were asked to describe, in the fullest sense, experiences, situations, and circumstances in which they believed their family had strength.

Polit and Hungler (1991) warned phenomenological researchers not to impose structure on the research situation by deciding in advance what questions to ask and how to ask them, as this will only restrict the participants’ descriptions of their experience. Consequently, the following are only examples of questions that were used to elicit data about the experience of strength in a single-parent family.
from the mother’s perspective:

1. How would you describe situations, events, and relationships that require family strength.

2. How would you describe your thoughts and feelings at these times.

3. From where does your family draw strength?

4. What resources have you used for your family? yourself?

5. What are you most proud of about your family? yourself?

6. What is your present relationship like with your children? your extended family? your friends?

7. Knowing what you now know, would you do anything different with your life?

8. What is your advice to other women who are living in a single-parent family?

Interviews with the mothers were exhilarating and, at times, exhausting as they related stories about strength required for everyday life; strength needed to overcome losses, crises, and transitions; and strength needed to deal with relationships with their children, the men in their lives, and the school system. Their stories made me chuckle, and they evoked deep feelings of sadness which connected me to my own strengths and vulnerabilities. Their stories also brought forth a deep admiration for these women. The women seemed to be empowered as they talked with confidence about their lives and, at other times, they spoke hesitantly to find words to describe their experiences. All in all, they seemed to
appreciate the opportunity to speak about their strengths.

**Interviews and Artwork with Children**

Initially, I engaged the children by introducing myself and told them that I had already talked to their mothers about their family strength. I explained the research project in words that the children could understand. Prior to data collection, in some instances, I participated in activities in which they were involved. For example, 1 of the children was trying to fix his bubble machine, so I attempted to help him with this project. With another child, I met her at a fitness club; prior to the interview at her home, we had dinner at the club.

Written consent was provided by the mother for children 8 to 11 years old; these children also gave their verbal consent. Written assent was obtained from 12-year-old children, as outlined by Institutional Review Board of the University of Utah (see Appendix D). In any event, the children were given opportunities to say whether they wished to participate in the study. If any eligible member of the family refused to participate in the study, the entire family was excluded. Two families were excluded from this study, as 2 male children refused to participate.

During the conversational interview, the child was asked initially to draw a picture of her or his family. The instructions to the children were simply, "Draw a picture of your family." Crayons and 8 1/2" x 11" paper were provided by me. The children decided where they wished to draw the picture. The settings varied; some children chose the coffee table, the kitchen table, or the dining room table. With the exception of 1 child, all children displayed an eagerness to draw a picture
of their families. After the picture had been completed, I asked the children where they wanted the tape-recorded interview to take place. The settings varied from the children's bedrooms, the living room, the family room, and the kitchen. With the exception of 1 family, all mothers were present in the home at the time of the interview. I opened the conversational interview with the child by discussing the family drawing. The following are examples only of questions that were used:

1. Who is in the picture?
2. What are they doing in the picture?
3. What do you like to do with your family? mother? father? brother(s)? sister(s)? others?
4. Who are your friends? What do you like to do with your friends?
5. Who helps you with your schoolwork?
6. What do you like about your family?
7. Imagine you are shipwrecked on a desert island. Who would you like to have there with you? Imagine you have a free rocket trip to Mars. Who would you like to take with you?
8. Imagine you have a magic wand. What three wishes would you make for your family?

It has been suggested that school-aged children can be interviewed optimally for 30 to 40 minutes; however, children 10+ years old may be interviewed for 1 hour or more without difficulty (Faux et al., 1988). In this study, the length of the interview ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour. Individual judgments were made as
to the termination of the conversational interviews, taking into consideration the child's level of fatigue, boredom, and data collected. In 1 case, the interview was terminated shortly after the child returned from the bathroom with a spray bottle. It was obvious that he was no longer interested in the interview.

The interview experience with the children proved to be delightful, emotionally moving, and unpredictable at times. For the most part, the children did not remain seated during the interview; instead, they roamed about their physical space while showing me their favorite collections of porcelain dolls, cars, and pictures. The children's drawings of their family were useful tools in engaging and focusing them to talk about what they liked about their families. Not only did the children discuss their immediate family (the family they lived with) but also conversations led to descriptions of the extended family, their friends, and pets. After the more formal part of the interview was completed, some children engaged me further by inviting me into their world of play either as an active participant or as an interested bystander.

Children in 2 of the families wanted to visit my home and play with my dog, Charly. With the permission of the parents, I was able to accommodate their requests. Both visits entailed a nature walk with Charly and me. This encounter was an enlightening, rich, and spiritual experience for me. I became acutely aware that spiritual experiences can happen on a walk with a small child—a child who is open to the mysteries of life. It was wonderful to see and hear life through the world of children, as it gave me hope for future generations and
connected me to my own inner strength.

Management and Analysis of the Data

Data were managed and analyzed according to the procedures outlined by Colaizzi (1978), Miles and Huberman (1984), Moustakas (1990), and Patton (1990). In addition, the researcher's creative process is described to document fully the description of the thematic analysis and the development of the fundamental structure. The fundamental structure is a description of the essence of the phenomenon.

Managing and Analyzing

Initially, transcription of the 12 audiotapes was carried out by a secretary who was experienced in qualitative data transcription. The secretary typed verbatim comments, including laughter, pauses, stuttering, and so forth. In addition, she did not correct grammar mistakes.

After the audiotapes were transcribed, I listened to them and reviewed the transcription to correct any mistakes made by the secretary. I also listened to each participant’s audiotape, and I read each transcription of the audiotape to acquire a sense of meaning about the uniqueness of each participant and also to gain a sense of the “whole.” Other supplementary documentation such as the children’s artwork also was studied to grasp the experience from each unique perspective, as well as a sense of the whole.

After several readings of the transcribed interviews, two overarching themes
were inducted: (a) being and becoming and (b) being in the world with others. Being and becoming related to single-parent women's strength within the context of the family. Being in the world with others related to strength within family relationships. Significant phrases and sentences pertaining to the phenomenon of single-parent strength and family strength were color coded, and notes were made in the margins of the transcribed interview. This extraction process was pursued by examining the raw data containing the substantive comments from the participants. The following questions were posed about the data: What is this? What does this represent?

Theme categories were developed over several months by reflecting and intuiteding. With the use of Word Perfect 5.1 move and copy function, each theme category was extracted from each participant's transcribed interview, which resulted in all the data for each theme category being in one place. Consequently, it was easier to compare and contrast each participant's substantive data subsumed under each theme category. Formulated meanings were developed for each substantive statement subsumed under the theme category. An example of the substantive data and formulated meanings for the essential theme of "introspecting" is displayed in Appendix E.

Simultaneously, an investigation of the derivative and original meaning of the words used to label the major thematic categories was undertaken to assure that the theme category was a conceptual fit for the substantive data. Patton (1990) suggested that the theme categories should be judged by two criteria: "internal
homogeneity and external heterogeneity" (p. 403). These judgments were based on the theme category making sense and explaining a particular grouping of concepts and the theme categories being mutually exclusive to the extent that the differences among the theme categories were bold and clear.

The description of the essential themes was written and reworked several times. This entailed a back-and-forth process during the analysis and synthesis of the data to assure the accuracy of the theme categories and the placement of the data in the theme categories. Two of the supervisory committee members provided feedback about the themes, which was used for thinking and rewriting.

Results of the data categorization were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon. The description included integration of the theme categories of the phenomenon, as experienced collectively by the single-parent mothers and their children. A description of the phenomenon of strength for single-parent mothers was developed, and the strength from a family unit perspective was developed from the mothers' and children’s perspectives.

The exhaustive description of the phenomenon was formulated into a statement of its fundamental structure. In other words, the essence of the phenomenon can be revealed by a creative synthesis, which requires the researcher to capture the deeper meaning of the phenomenon through “a narrative, story, poem, work of art, metaphor, analogy, or tale” (Moustakas 1990, p. 52). For example, I captured the essence of the phenomenon of strength by writing a poem about a river. The metaphor was used to explicate the lived experience of strength
from the mothers' and single-parent families' perspectives.

As such, the above description of the management and analysis of the data appears as if it is a linear and a mechanical process. Conversely, it is a creative process whereby the researcher works back and forth between data collection and analysis and during the analysis and synthesis of the data to verify the meaning and accuracy of the theme categories and the placement of data in the theme categories. It is a tedious and time-consuming process, but data become alive, so to speak. The researcher gains great insight not only about the phenomenon under study but about the informants themselves.

**Creating**

Writing and rewriting the thematic analysis have been an exhilarating, uplifting, and a peaceful experience. At other times, the creative process has been lonely, solitary, and difficult. Listening to and writing about the women's and children's stories of their strengths and vulnerabilities have reawakened and clarified for me what matters most in life. It has stretched me beyond my own expectations and dreams.

I spent many hours with my thoughts, feelings, and exasperation; with my dog, Charly, who always understands me; and with my reliable computer. My other steady companions sit on my window sill, a rock and a dead ladybug, which is imprisoned between the window panes. The rock in the shape of a bone was given to me by Melody, 1 of the children in the study. During our nature walk together, she collected rocks, but she called them "fossils." This rock continues to
symbolize strength to me and somehow keeps me going. The ladybug remains dead in its tracks, but its red shell has not disintegrated, a symbol of staying power and strength.

My solitary companions have been there as I scanned, mused, mulled, read, and listened to my own inner thoughts and feelings about the data. To break free from these periods of absorption and intensity, I took long walks along the river path with my dog, Charly. In this peaceful environment, I continued to mull the data in my mind. Being in a more relaxed state, insights would break through the stillness like a lighting flash illuminating the sky.

My most vivid, creative breakthrough came on an inspiring morning walk. I had finished writing and rewriting the themes and fundamental structure, and I wanted to represent the phenomenon of strength through poetic expression. I had never written a poem before, and I thought to myself, “I can’t do this; I’m not artistic. Maybe one of the women in the study could capture the phenomenon of strength by writing a poem; better yet, maybe one of the children could write a poem about their family.”

Armed with self-doubt, but feeling spring in the air and spring within me, I set out on my walk. The images of spring appeared before me as though I was seeing them for the first time. The river was flowing forcefully breaking up the ice floes; the water was clear around the ice floes so one could see to the darker depths. Off in the distance a proud snowman with black teeth sat at the river’s edge announcing spring had arrived in all its glory. The ducks and Canadian geese
called the river their home as they honked, flapped their wings with pride, and
looked at people with wise knowing. When we approached the birds, some of
them stood their ground and others flew in a flurry. I thought, there is strength in
their staying and leaving.

The visual images of spring reminded me of the strength of single-parent
families. With some excitement, I ran home to fetch my camera so I could cement
these images in my mind. The next morning I awoke earlier than usual, sat at my
desk, and spilled the poem on paper in a matter of minutes. The observation of
nature in conjunction with my intuition led me to this profound insight. I
questioned why I had not seen these connections earlier, as I walk along the river
every morning of my life.

Validation

Validation was sought from 3 of the 4 families to compare my descriptive
results with the participants’ lived experiences. The findings were sent to each
participant to read. Two of the 4 families had moved, and 1 of the families did
not leave a forwarding address and they had an unlisted phone number; thus, I was
unable to contact the family. The other participant who moved wrote a letter
regarding her feedback about the results of the study, and I conducted another
interview with the other 2 remaining families. The 3 families that I contacted
offered some clarification regarding their substantive quotes. Generally, they
agreed that the description of the individual and family strength was consistent and
meaningful to their experience. Two families suggested that introspecting and
transcending were the most crucial strength for themselves. The women were emotionally moved, aware of the similarity of responses between mother and child, and amazed at some of their children’s responses to the interviews. These women felt a close connection with each other and mentioned they would like to meet eventually. One of the mothers stated, “Each family appeared to go through a similar process with different experiences.”

**Methodological Rigor**

The criteria of auditability, credibility, fittingness, and confirmability from Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) conceptualization of methodological rigor for qualitative studies were used to discuss rigor pertinent to this study. Auditability is accomplished when the researcher describes the decisions that are made throughout the research project. Auditability was demonstrated in this dissertation beginning with the description of the philosophical underpinnings of the phenomenological method. Personal and theoretical assumptions were put forth. Analysis of the research question, selection of the research participants, description of procedures of data generation, management and analysis of the data, and findings are described to enhance the audit trail.

Credibility refers to the criterion that is used to evaluate the truth value of qualitative studies. Credibility was met by tape recording conversations with the participants and assisting them to provide clear, vivid descriptions of their lived experiences. Participants were selected on their ability to articulate the phenomenon under study. During the conversational interviews with the
participants, an atmosphere of trust was created so that they could share their stories in an open, honest manner. I returned to the participants themselves during the data analysis phase to determine if my interpretations reflected accurately their experiences of family strength. Credibility was enhanced in this study because other data sources such as examples of experiences from 1 woman’s journal were shared, and children’s artwork was used to elucidate the phenomenon of strength within the single-parent family. During the entire study, I was cognizant of my basic assumptions about the single-parent family in today’s society. Thus, I volitionally bracketed these assumptions to hear and understand fully the experiences of the participants.

Fittingness is achieved when audiences other than the participants view the findings as meaningful and applicable to their own situations and when findings can fit into contexts outside the study situation. In other words, human experiences are both unique and universal, which means that your experiences are mine and my experiences are yours (Van Manen, 1990). To assess whether I captured the lived experience of strength within a single-parent family, my supervisory committee evaluated the analytical preciseness of the theme categories, exhaustive descriptions, and fundamental structure derived from the data and attested to the fittingness criteria. Another method used to meet the criterion took place when the findings regarding the individual strength of women were presented at an international nursing conference in Madrid, Spain. Positive feedback was received in the discussion period. In addition, presentation of the research findings at
single-parent groups and family research conferences and future publications will assist me to validate further the phenomenon of strength within single-parent families.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that confirmability is the criterion of neutrality in qualitative research that refers to the findings themselves, not to the relationship the researcher establishes with the participants. Confirmability, in their estimation, is met when the category structure is clear, has explanatory power, and fits the data. Ongoing feedback will be solicited regarding the findings of this study through presentations and publications.

**Ethical Considerations**

The women and children in this study were informed of the purpose of the study and were provided with a clear description of their involvement in the study, the risks and benefits, and the plans to assure confidentiality. Following verbal description of the research project, the mothers were given a consent form to sign, and further questions were clarified at this time (see Appendix C). A verbal consent was obtained from children ages 8 to 11 years old. An assent was obtained from children who were 12 years old (see Appendix D).

Confidentiality was approached in the following way: Family members’ data were identified through the use of code names, which, along with audiotapes and demographic questionnaires, were destroyed/erased at the completion of the study.

The primary benefit the participants may have gained from being involved
in this study is the sense of empowerment from telling their stories about their family strength from their perspective. Risks to family members were anticipated, in that some of their time was used, and personal information was shared with me.

Family members were informed that they may refuse to answer any of the questions; they may withdraw from the study at anytime; all questions that they may have about the study will be answered to the best of my ability; and finally, copies of the final report of the study will be made available to them if they so desire.

**Research Limitations**

Phenomenological research depends upon the participant’s ability to articulate vividly and with some depth his or her experiences about the phenomenon under study. The researcher must be highly skilled in the interviewing process and must possess analytical skills to deal with the massive amount of data that are accumulated in a qualitative study. Patton (1990) stated, “The human factor is the great strength and the fundamental weakness of qualitative inquiry and analysis” (p. 372).

Nurses may have an advantage in qualitative research, as they are educated about and trained in the interviewing process, and they are required to work with clients of all ages in their educational programs. However, because nurse researchers live in the adult world, it may be difficult to understand the world of children from their perspective, unless the researcher gains the trust of the child. Fine and Sandstrom (1988) suggested that if the researcher can “transcend age and
authority boundaries, children may provide access to their ‘hidden’ culture” (p. 17). One key element for this project was to interact with children in a trusted way without having an explicit authority role. The case with adult participants in this phenomenological study was essentially the same. It took only a short time for the participants to develop trust in me.

During the interviewing process, it was of utmost importance to develop an atmosphere of trust, openness, and authenticity so that single-parent mothers and their children could talk openly and candidly about their experiences. This was not always easy to accomplish, but every effort was made on my part to ensure that the participants were comfortable with the interviewing process.

Bracketing is by no means an easy process, but it was necessary to put aside personal and theoretical assumptions to the best of my ability while studying the phenomenon. A conscious effort was made to be aware of my personal biases, to make them known to my supervisory committee members, and then to hold them in check so that the phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives could be described.

Summary

In Chapter III, the epistemological assumptions underscoring phenomenological inquiry were discussed, a detailed outline was presented for data generation, and management and data analysis procedures were detailed. The methodological rigor pertinent to this study was discussed. Finally, ethical considerations were developed, and limitations of the study were discussed.
CHAPTER IV

PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS

Introduction

Nine essential themes were inducted during data analysis. As previously stated, data were generated through conversational interviews with 4 single-parent mothers and their 8 school-aged children. In addition, children were asked to draw a picture of their families. Interviews with the mothers and their children were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location. Interviews were transcribed by a qualified secretary, and data analysis was undertaken. Following analysis of the data, the findings were sent to each participant, and validation was sought from the mothers in the study.

The first section of the chapter describes the families in the study. Next, the essential themes are presented with illustrative quotes from the mothers and children. Finally, the fundamental structure and creative synthesis in the form of a poem are presented.

The Families

The families in this study were selected on the basis of their experience of strength and their ability to articulate this experience. The family's eligibility for the study was evaluated based on a telephone call in which I briefly described the
study and then asked if the mothers could describe any experiences of strength. After confirmation with the mothers, I suggested they discuss the study with their children to gain their willingness to participate.

The sample was selected from recommendations made by colleagues and friends. In 1 case, I selected a mother I had known. The sample included 4 families, 12 participants in all. The mothers' ages ranged from 29 to 40 years old. Their average income was from below $20,000 to $40,000 dollars per year. Educational preparation varied: One mother enrolled in grade 12; 1 mother completed 1 year of college and then married; another mother completed a university degree and is presently enrolled in art therapy school; and 1 mother completed a master's degree. The number of hours worked outside the home ranged from 5 hours to 37 hours. Three of the 4 families organized child care privately, and for 1 family day-care was provided. Three of the 4 families had little or no involvement with the fathers. In the 4th family, the children spent part of every weekend with the father. Three of the mothers had been divorced from 5 to 6 years, and the other mother had been separated for 4 years before divorcing.

In order to acquaint one with the uniqueness of each family, a brief description follows. The mothers and children were assigned fictitious names by me to protect their anonymity.

Judith is 29 years old with sparkling brown eyes and energy to burn. Her daughter, Melody, is 8 years old, a free spirit who is curious, sociable, and
interested in life around her. Melody has many friends her own age, and she has little difficulty conversing with adults. Judith has a master’s degree in nursing, works part time as a nursing instructor, and does clinical work at a hospital. In order to make mortgage payments, she has a female roommate who sometimes baby-sits Melody.

During the duration of this research project, Judith’s father was diagnosed with cancer and eventually died. Judith and Melody have grieved the loss of a father and a grandfather. On the 1st-year anniversary date of his death, Judith went home to her parents’ farm and planted flowers in his remembrance. She has periods of time when she must grieve her loss in solitude. Her future goal is to pursue education at the PhD level.

Lynn is 33 years old and has a degree in nursing. She is presently pursuing a degree in art therapy. Previously, she worked at a children’s hospital in the mental health field. She has two children; Shane is 10 years old and Elizabeth is 8 years old. Shane is a quiet, polite young man who is interested in his peers. He plays with his sister when there is no one else available. Elizabeth is a delightful child who dabbles in imaginative play with her young friends. The children spend weekends with their father, which they enjoy because there are young children to play with in the father’s home. Lynn and her children have settled into their new life in another Canadian city.

Ann is 40 years old and has been separated from her husband for 4 years. She works 10 to 20 hours a week as a volunteer school aide. Her divorce is final,
and she is contemplating further education. Ann speaks with confidence and
laughs easily. She has two children: a 9-year-old daughter, Nancy, and a son,
Bob, who is not quite 8 years old. Nancy is a thoughtful, introspective child who
is very artistic. She likes to write poems, stories, and plays. Bob is mechanically
inclined and likes to collect "things."

Susan is a determined, courageous woman of 32 years with three daughters:
Angela, Lori, and Bekki. Susan described her own childhood as a "death camp
experience" and is determined to make life better for her own children. Currently,
she is trying to complete grade 12 but finds school difficult because of a "learning
disability." She also works as a part-time receptionist. Her three daughters are
enjoyable to be around, and they take pride in their mother's determination to
finish school. Angela, the 13-year-old daughter, has more responsibility and
privileges, which she accepts. There is a close affinity between Lori and Bekki;
they are similar in age (8 and 9 years old, respectively); they walk to school
together and play with one another. Generally, this family is a cohesive unit in
which sharing and caring about one another are valued.

The Findings

Single-parent women have discovered that to be human is to be in the world
and in a relationship with someone. The experience of strength is not a solitary
pursuit but rather is experienced through connectedness with the self and their
families, friends, and universe.

The experience of loss through a divorce served as an awakening, moving
the women to new levels of being and becoming and being in the world with others. De Beauvoir (1963) stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (p. 267). The experience of inner strength for these women was gained looking inward by (a) introspecting to discover self; (b) emoting to develop a deeper understanding of their real selves; (c) knowing that grew out of their embeddedness in human relationships; (d) finding freedom to create their own destiny as well as to shape their children's destiny; (e) gaining resilience in order to adjust, change, and overcome adversity; and (f) transcending the limits of ordinary experience and understanding. The women's strength sustained the family and is reflected in the following themes: (a) cocreating family harmony, (b) sharing family power, and (c) connecting humanely.

**Introspecting**

Looking inward to find strength was a vital experience for the participants. Through introspection, the women discovered self. According to the Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy, introspection derives from the Latin “intro, inward, within, into, and specere look” that means “giving mental attention to one's mind, self, or consciousness” (Angeles, 1992, p. 149).

**Judith.** Judith, a nurse who recently completed her master’s degree in nursing, began her introspection by entering the stillness of the self and writing in a private journal. Writing became a “long-term relationship” with herself and provided a means whereby she moved beyond the uncomfortable feelings of the past to a new sense of self, a self that incorporated being a parent. In her own
words, Judith described her growth experience:

And when I was first on my own, I had a lot of feelings. I felt very guilty, sad, and afraid and many of the feelings that people do feel when they are on their own. It was very therapeutic for me to write it. But it was also very therapeutic to go back and read and see that a year ago these were some of the issues that I was struggling with, and now they are not. . . . And I have moved beyond them and I guess I could see growth in myself . . . of how overwhelmed I felt at first being a parent.

Judith’s writing experience also became a place in which she protected her inner self from outside interference in order to find her true self.

But after that when I was on my own, I wrote almost every day, and it got to be like a long-term relationship. It was a period of time that I could just let my feelings be there and nobody could criticize it or judge it nor would I have to pretend.

Being alone assisted Judith with the awareness of her deepest feelings and the search for her authentic being. Her journal provided a safe place in which she could self-disclose without any fear of judgment. The following excerpt vividly describes her experience:

I find when I write I don’t think; I just let myself feel it and write it so that I try not to let my defenses get in the way even when I talk with another person; I always was concerned what they would think or say. . . . So this [writing] was something that was very safe; and the only rule that I had was that I had to be very truthful.

**Lynn.** Lynn, a nurse who decided to study art therapy to further her personal and professional development, captured the essence of introspection in a somewhat different way. Upon reflection, Lynn realized that in her marriage she was responsible for everything that moved her from her center. Her husband was another child in her eyes; someone she had to care for. After her divorce, she
described herself as having a more balanced disposition. Lynn described her movement to self-possession in the following way:

Our relationship was very conflictual. It was like I had another kid. . . . things that I remember are trying to get the kids off so I could go to school and the kids to day-care; and they would say, well Mommy how come I have to go, Daddy's in bed? [I would answer] 'Cause he has been out all night . . . so it was very stressful, and to end the relationship was a relief. I was more unhappy then, and now I'm more even keeled than I used to be back then.

Lynn recognized that she was an introvert, and even during aerobics classes she would go inward to reveal herself to herself. She divulged:

It's relaxing and it's [aerobics] a release, and it is on my own; I'm an introvert and I don't know if that makes a difference. It probably does. I get my strength from being on my own. I can regroup and then I can go out again. . . . That can be part of it . . . I need time to pull within and then I'm ready to go back out again.

Counselling over the years was helpful for Lynn in that access to self opened up new ways of understanding her growth. Counselling provided a means to discover what issues she needed to deal with; even if the issues were not dealt with, Lynn believed she knew what they were.

I needed counselling to walk away from that relationship [husband]. I needed permission that I could do that because it was a lot of guilt. It was an abusive relationship; and so he would come back . . . [and tell me] I love you and then I would go and always give into it; and so I needed counselling and someone to say that yes, you can do that and you are not doing a bad thing.

Recently, with some trepidation, Lynn decided to leave nursing and enter art therapy school. She has turned to artistic endeavors in her search for self-expression and the creation of a new beginning. Lynn's search for herself, which has come from creative activity springing from within, has opened up a whole new
world for her and has given her a sense of accomplishment. She talked hesitantly about a project that she made in her art class, which she described as her beginning:

Right now I’m making this thing; it kind of looks like the shape of a fish but more like a tadpole; there’s no details, it’s more of a form, of a . . . and then there’s little fins down there, and it’s called the beginning. . . .

**Ann.** Ann, a busy volunteer at her children’s school and a self-professed extrovert, realized that she needed solitude as well to return to the self. She acknowledged that after a busy day she needed a quiet place with no distractions from her children in order to gain composure:

I think that I know my own limitations; and when I feel my nerves are getting frazzled . . . I need to take a break; lots of time it’s the bathroom, that’s my screaming closet. I will lock myself in the bathroom and take a book and read it or in my room because it has a locked door as well. And, I will take 5 or 10 or 15 minutes, however long I need to take, so that I don’t lose it. If I don’t lose it, they [children] don’t lose it usually.

Ann created a separate physical space, as well as a psychological space, to return to the self. Her self-talk affirmed her being as a person and a mother.

Particularly in the last 4 or 5 years, I do a lot of positive thoughts to myself. I do a lot of, . . . I can, I can, I am, I will. . . . And everyone in the household is expected to do certain jobs because mommy is not a slave around here.

**Susan.** Susan reflected on her childhood as a “death camp experience,” as she was raised in her early years in an abusive, alcoholic family. She subsequently went into foster care and finally became a “street kid.” With the help of therapy, she has examined her past life and gained insight. She realized that she married to
find a father, a father she never had. She commented:

When I married my ex, it was for a father figure which I didn’t have. I was not raised with a father and he [husband] just happened to fit the bill at the time. Of course, at the time I would never have admitted to that, but now looking back... I can.

Susan has been able to inspect her inner being and in doing so has discovered that she had an inner vitality and power to act on her own behalf and that of her children. She summed it up in the following way:

When I was married, I was a mouse. Now that I’m not, people can’t shut me up. When I was younger, I was raised that you are seen and not heard. And I lived that role until I got separated, and I started to get angry back at the world, at everybody, and I said, enough is enough.

In dialogue with herself, Susan questioned her very existence. She was able to identify some of her life’s goals but pondered her future: “I question what is my whole purpose in life. Why am I here? And I think I did what I was supposed to do, I was supposed to multiply, so I did, 3 times... Now what do I do?”

Introspection involved looking inward to discover their essential nature as women in conjunction with their parenting self. The experience of separateness by inward looking granted an opportunity for these women to become connected to their inner selves.

**Emoting**

Emotion derives from Latin “emovere, remove, shake, stir up” (Angeles, 1992, p. 84). According to Bradshaw (1988), emotions are forms of energy that are “direct expressions of reality as opposed to thoughts which translate or analyze
our experience. Emotions give important information about what we need to do, what we want or how we want to change” (p. 44). The process of emoting was a way of experiencing the authentic self, a feeling self in all its profundity. Listening, trusting inner feelings in a quiet, still space moved these women to a deeper place.

Feelings of sadness, anger, vulnerability, and love weaved through the women’s lives as they worked through their own losses and the losses their children were experiencing. Not only were the women experiencing losses associated with divorce, but they also were responding to recent and forthcoming moves, domestic crises, terminal illness, and death of parents.

**Judith.** Judith did not retreat from the pain of her divorce; instead she embodied her sadness so that healing could take place. Judith illustrated this by talking about her divorce in the following way:

> But I think one of the things that I really learned over the past 6 years of being on my own and going through a divorce and what not is that if you don’t feel your loss and your feelings when they happen, you will feel them sometime eventually. The first year when I was on my own, when I was sad, I just let myself feel as much as I could; and if I was crying, I would let myself cry as long and as hard as I needed to. And I would not try to pretend that I was not feeling it.

For Judith, feelings of sadness had not only been associated with divorce but most recently Judith was coping with the terminal illness and eventual death of her father. During the grieving process, she invited sorrow to enter her being by listening to sad music and having a cup of tea. She believed that music connected her to her emotional self, a self that experienced true, deep feelings—a healing
place. In conversation with Judith, she described her experience of sadness that coexisted with a sense of peacefulness.

I think that music helps me a lot because to me music is something that is very emotional. It connects in with your emotion. So if I’m feeling down or sort of sad, that’s the kind of music I listen to. . . . Music is almost a facilitator to those feelings. And yet it is something that is almost enjoyable in a sense; it’s okay just to sit and put some sad music on and have a cup of tea . . . and feel sad for the evening. Because to me, it is very healthy to feel sad if something is wrong.

Judith believes that the expression of sad feelings is important; but on the other hand, these feelings should not entirely consume one’s total being. There is more to life than being sad all the time. However, crying is an important way to express one’s true feelings, one’s authentic being. The ability to express one’s emotions outwardly is a strength. “My crying does not mean that I’m weak. . . . It just means that I’m sad and that I need to cry and that to me is okay; it helps me to let go of some of that [sad feelings] and to feel better then.”

Judith’s family tried every possible treatment to abet her father’s cancer. As a last resort, a trip to a health clinic in Mexico was undertaken. Hope was fundamental to Judith’s being, as she would not give up until her father’s eventual death. With a voice full of feeling, she stated: “I have not totally given up hope either, which I don’t know is good or bad, but that’s just how I am. I won’t give up hope until there is, you know, until he dies, and there is no hope left.”

Lynn. Lynn’s experience regarding her father’s death was somewhat different. Her father was an alcoholic; because of his illness, she described her family as being emotionally distant during her childhood. More recently, she
attempted to develop a closer relationship with her father. Their relationship had improved somewhat but not to the extent that she had hoped. She came to terms with this situation by stating that the responsibility was not entirely hers. The death of her father assisted Lynn to contact a deeper, inner place and to talk more openly with her siblings about their feelings of rejection within the family—something they had not discussed in the past. This crisis also prompted an expression of love and the need for harmony and unity within the family of origin. Lynn said: “So I talk to him [brother] about what’s going on; and I had to be closer to say I love you, and I don’t want this thing to split us apart. I never said anything like that before.”

Ann. In much the same way, Ann captured the essence of emoting in her belief that it was necessary to display emotions outwardly. In particular, she promoted this belief with her children. Sadness and anger were acceptable emotions that warranted expression within the family. She revealed the following:

Just as I allow them to cry, I will allow them to be angry, too. So, if they are angry, they are not allowed to pummel somebody else; but they are certainly allowed to hit their bed or bang the floor or something like that. I think that it is necessary for them to be able to vent their feelings.

Susan. Likewise, anger was no stranger to Susan. Anger was something she had felt for many years living in an abusive home and foster homes and finally experiencing a conflictual marriage. During her childhood, she was silenced with violence; she never was taken seriously while growing up. Over the years, she has moved from silent submission and ineffective fighting toward a sense of who she is
as a person and what she stands for. Anger has preserved Susan's integrity because of her ability to discount the way she had been defined in the past. Susan explained:

I had a hard time for people accepting me for who I was just because of the things I said . . . and I always say, “Well, what you see is what you get; if you don’t like it, you know where the door is.”

The women in this study identified their innermost emotional experiences, and they accepted their feelings as part of who they are and what they represent. Emotions were experienced in an inviting and knowing way, a way that facilitated knowing the deeper parts of themselves.

**Knowing**

*Chamber’s Etymological English Dictionary* gives the primary definition of the verb “to know” in the following way: “to be informed of, to be assured of, to have personal experience of, to be acquainted with, to recognize, to be versed in” (Macdonald, 1965, p. 350). The dictionary definition falls short, however, as it does not fully reflect the experience of knowing for the study participants.

Consequently, the definition of knowing put forth by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) is used for discussion in this study.

According to Belenky et al. (1986), subjective knowing is personal, private, and intuited. Truth resides within the person not with an external authority. The authors concluded that as a “woman becomes more aware of the existence of inner resources for knowing and valuing, as she begins to listen to the ‘still small voice’
within her, she finds an inner source of strength” (p. 54). On the other hand, constructed knowing or the “voice of integration” (p. 133) means that there is a place for reason, intuition, and expertise of others.

Knowing for the women in this study sprung from their connectedness with themselves, children, extended families, and friends. The women were highly intuitive, as illustrated below, and, for the most part, were capable of integrating their knowledge base with intuition and past experiences. Their desire to understand themselves, their children, extended family, and friends emanated from varied life experiences.

**Lynn.** Lynn provided a good example of wanting to know her inner self in greater depth by choosing a career path that would unfold her capabilities of self-knowledge and further develop her knowledge about the inner world of children. As a nurse, Lynn explored art as a means to communicate with children in a psychiatric setting. She decided to leave nursing and enter art therapy school in a new city to learn more about the inner world of children and her own development. This meant uprooting her family; however, she believed that she had the strength to adjust to a move and to pursue her goals even though she had doubts about her artistic ability. Intuitively, she knew that this was the right decision for her and her children. She made the following comment: “I would really like to be an artist, although I don’t think that I have the talent to be an artist. But I feel that there is something in it for me.”

**Ann.** On the other hand, Ann gained knowledge from experts and from her
experiences. She intuitively knew what was best for her children. For example, she listened carefully to the school psychologist as he analyzed her son's school phobia. After some thought, she decided that a pet cat might alleviate her son's experience of abandonment. She recollected that she had grown up with numerous pets in her life and recognized the unconditional love that animals could provide. After bringing a cat home from an animal shelter, she noted with some astonishment how her son's feelings of abandonment disappeared. Ann explained, "And so as soon as we got this kitten, he [her son] didn't have a problem in going to school, because even if mom was not at home, the cat certainly would be at home."

Judith. Knowing for Judith was direct and immediate in the way she was able to visualize. She described her visualization as a "picture in my mind with a conversation that goes along with it." She had the uncanny ability to predict future events such as the care her terminally ill father would receive. She recounted her visualization in the following way:

I had this really strong visualization of this man saying to my father, "It's okay, you and your wife will stay here with me and we are going to do the treatment and it's okay. . . ." Three or 4 days later my mother phoned me quite concerned because she wanted my father to go to this clinic in Mexico for treatment. And it was so similar to my visualization that it was hard to believe, but it seemed like yes, he needed to go there.

Not only was Judith able to predict the future but she also had the ability to know the people she needed in her life. She recollected the initial meeting with a girlfriend, "As soon as I met her, I knew there was this connection. And I knew i
needed her in my life."

**Susan.** Susan's knowing people was dependent on her life experiences, especially her experiences of being a child from an abusive home, eventually a foster child, and then a "street kid." Living on the streets provided Susan with the ability to be a detective of human nature; that is, she believed one had to watch people to know them. She also tried to teach her daughters to be astute to the nature of human beings because she believed that life is what you teach your children.

Susan is in grade 12 and finds learning difficult; her daughter, Angela, is in grade 7. The following excerpt exemplifies Susan's use of life experience in relating to her daughter's misgivings about school and her threats to quit school. Susan imitated her daughter's voice as she spoke.

"Oh I'm no good in school any more mom. I failed all my tests and I can't do anything right." [Susan's response to her daughter] "Oh yeah, that's a really good attitude." [Susan goes on to describe her experience when she was a youth] When I was in a foster home, I always used to threaten my foster parents. "I'm going to run away...." I never liked her [foster mother], and we always fought. We were never close. She always used to say to me, "Well there's the door, close it behind you." [Laughs] ... I said that to Angela and it works. If you think about all your past experiences, you have to know when to use them and when not to use them.

Susan also refrained from using words to describe how she developed a relationship with her children. Knowing and loving her children were being there for them, which was something that could not be put into words and could not be expressed as feelings. Knowing was personal and private. Susan explained,
I don’t take compliments very well, and how I build my relationship with my kids is my own special technique that I don’t tell anybody because I don’t know myself. It just develops and there it is you know. I don’t label it, and I’m not one to express how I feel.

**Discovering Freedom**

Freedom to be and become was a liberating experience for these women.

According to the *Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy*, freedom is defined as

self-determination, self-control, self-direction, self-regulation. . . ; being compelled or directed by desirable internal motives, ideals, wishes, and drives as opposed to external or internal compulsion, coercion or constraint; the ability to choose and the opportunity to satisfy or procure that choice. (Angeles, 1992, pp. 114-115)

Parse’s (1981) view of freedom is that “man chooses the meaning given to the situations that he cocreates” (p. 27). Furthermore, human beings bear responsibility for the choices they make even though they may not foresee the outcomes of these choices.

**Judith.** Strength came out of different liberating experiences for these women. Prior to Judith’s divorce, parenting was accomplished, for the most part, by her unemployed husband. Now parenting was her sole responsibility; therefore, she had to rely on her own understanding of what it meant to parent. Strength occurred over time as Judith discovered that she could parent on her own. She elaborated,

I think for myself; I have strength in that it has not always been this way; but it’s been a process. It’s almost 6 years now that we have been on our own, and I would be hard pressed to say that we had strength as a family or strength as a individual because everything was so new. And it was a real transition force because Melody’s father had been at home and looked after her.
Responsibility of parenting on her own provided Judith with self-understanding and inner strength. In her own words, Judith said,

Being alone and totally responsible for Melody has made me understand myself so much more because there is not another person there; you have to look into yourself more for your strength and understanding of how to be a parent.

**Ann.** On the other hand, Ann always considered herself to be a single parent, even when married. The decision regarding parenting for this family was that Ann would be the constant parent. It was her desire to be the person to care for her children because her husband was an absent father due to the nature of his work; also, her children were very sickly during their infancy. She recollected,

You get strength from somewhere. You get it from deep down in your boots because you need to, because these two little beings are dependent on you; and they are the ones who need someone to lean on.

Parenting her ill children in the infancy stage provided Ann with “an awful lot of stamina.” She believed that she had to be the strength of the family. She stated she had to be “the Wendy, I suppose, the nurturer and the caregiver.” Both Judith and Ann found the strength to parent on their own, hence, being in touch with their need for autonomy, self-reliance, and self-determination to create a space for themselves and their children.

**Susan.** Surviving as a single parent for Susan was a process in which she moved from dependency to being more autonomous and determined to “go it alone.” She talked about it in the following way:
The 1st year or 2 was really hard because when I was married I depended on this guy for pretty much everything, including to breathe or not. And it was an adjustment, but my main instincts in me are survival. And that is the only thing that did it for me. You are either going to do it or you don’t.

Susan has reached the stage in which she does not want any involvement from her ex-husband. She believes that she has the survival skills and the strength to parent in the way she chooses.

So through those years I learned that you survive for yourself and that’s it. So that has carried me through into raising three kids, but the only thing that I can say that I really like about it is the way my kids are raised.

Lynn. For the past few years, Lynn has wanted to go back to school and has moved with determination to fulfill her goal to become a nurse art therapist. She has found the strength to move away from her familiar support systems to create her own destiny.

Well, now I feel like I can do it. The kids are old enough that they are more independent; and the last few years I always felt no, I don’t want to move; I can’t move away from these support systems . . . but now I think it will be okay. This is something I need and want to do.

Both Lynn and Susan placed more emphasis on living their own lives and made choices relevant to their own needs, keeping in mind the needs of their children. They stepped out of rigid roles that constrained them during their married life. Both these women learned to live by their own inner strength as opposed to what society expected of women in the traditional family structure. Susan illustrated this in the following comments:
I’m not one to follow systems. I don’t like systems. I have refused to do what society says I should do, and I have survived you know.

I have become too independent on my own over the years, and I like my freedom. I like doing what I want to do. If my house is dirty, so what?

Lynn said,

I can do this without a man; it’s my own thing. We go camping, and we get the wood together, and we’ll chop it up; it’s a combined effort, and I just feel happy. I know that makes me feel proud.

**Gaining Resilience**

The meaning of the verb to gain, as put forth by *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, is “to get by a natural development or process” (Woolf, 1976, p. 469) and resilience is “the capability of a strained body to recover its size and shape after deformation caused especially by compressive stress, an ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune and change” (p. 985). For the women in this study, the process of gaining resilience involved flexibility in waiting and going forward to meet the challenge of living in a single-parent family situation.

**Judith.** During her conversation with me, Judith reflected on the strength that comes from birthing and caring for her daughter. Labor required physical strength but caring for her daughter required change and adjustment on her part—a change that pushed her to new limits. She reiterated,

I feel so much stronger and more sure of myself since I had this baby. . . . I don’t know, it made me feel like I was a strong person, not just physically to go through the labor but to be able to adjust and care for another person. It really changed my life, and it seemed a very natural thing to me to be a parent. It was sort of there. . . . I was worried about that before and I thought . . . so
how do you know when to feed them and when to do this and when to do that?

For Judith, the transition to parenting was a growth-producing process with the initial concerns of caring for a small infant to the stage in which Judith felt confident enough to take her 8-year-old daughter on a 6-week vacation to Europe. Accepting and meeting challenges gave Judith the confidence that she could face change and meet some of her cherished goals.

Melody and I went to Europe this summer which was a big thing for 6 weeks, and I was scared before I left. It seemed like a long ways to go with a little kid; but you know what, again it was just sort of happened, and it was very natural to be there and to do it with Melody. She was so great; she really enjoyed seeing something that was different, and she didn’t care that things were not the same as they used to be.

Judith also faced her father’s terminal illness and her boyfriend’s upcoming move. These losses were anticipated with patient waiting and a quiet hopefulness. She acknowledged the forthcoming losses and the accompanying feelings in the following excerpt:

I’m going to have some big losses and it’s really sad and it hurts. It’s okay to feel them, but it is not my whole life... if there can be a good time for things to happen in my life, I’m happy with who I am. I like my life, and I have good friends.

Lynn. A quiet perseverance permeated Lynn’s life as she dealt with her move to a new city, her entry into school, and her father’s death. She had faith that she could meet the challenge of a new life for herself and her children. She accepted the challenge with some confidence: “This is part of a process and it will, it will work out. My strength is good for me, which is new in the last few
years because I now can talk to people and just be more open.”

**Ann.** Lifestyle changes posed the biggest challenge to Ann and her family. Ann experienced a loss of financial income, which meant less material conveniences for her family. Despite financial difficulties, Ann was determined to adjust to these changes. She spoke about her financial loss and her need to adjust with tenacity.

> There have been a lot of changes. The kids don’t get the things they want, they get things that they need. And I don’t get anything that I would like or need [laughs], unless I get birthday money or something like that. . . . I mean, you have to adjust your financial life.

**Susan.** Susan was determined to turn her “death camp” experience around and achieve something out of her suffering. Her reason for being was to give her children a childhood that she never had and to establish a cohesive family unit. She experienced bouts of depression and energy that propelled her forward to deal with the challenges of life.

> If I had not taken that energy I had as a kid coming from an extremely depressed, alcoholic, abusive home, I would be 6 feet under by suicide. . . . There are a lot of times in my life now when I get really bummed out; and I keep saying to myself, if I didn’t have those kids, I would be gone.

Susan found school challenging, but despite her struggle she was determined to finish even if it took her 10 years to complete grade 12. She had self-doubts about her abilities but anger kept her going. She talked about it in the following way:
It takes a comment like somebody laughing at you and saying you are not going to make it. That anger alone will do it. That anger alone will say well pfff; you know you go through a turmoil; I'm not good enough or maybe I don't have what it takes. And then you get talking to other people, and you hear them, and you think, well, if that idiot can do it, so can I.

Taking the easy way out was not acceptable to Susan nor was quitting permissible. For example, she chose difficult school assignments to push herself to new heights. In order to grow, life needed to be challenging.

I don't like going for the normal topics that everybody else goes for. I always go for the hard ones that I can't do. But to me it is a challenge. If I have a challenge and I find it interesting enough, hey I will go for it. But if someone throws a challenge in my face and I don't think it is worth it, then I don't bother looking at it. . . . And with my kids, I try and teach them that if you are going to do something, you don't start it and not finish it.

Transcending

According to the Harper Collins Dictionary of Philosophy, “transcendent is a derivative from Latin, transcendere; from trans, across, over, beyond, and scandere, climb” (Angeles, 1992, p. 315). In order to transcend the ordinary experience of human connection, these women experienced a sense of unity and wholeness with life that constituted an inner strength to rise above their trials and tribulations. Transcendent moments of unity and wholeness happened in relationships with other humans, with the universe, and with various art forms.

Judith. A plane flight triggered a transcendent experience for Judith when she left her terminally ill father in the care of health professionals in Mexico. She was filled with the fear of losing her father as the plane soared above the clouds in
what she described as a “beautiful, peaceful existence.” Her feelings of awe and wonder connected her to the expansiveness of the universe and her inner spiritual power. This experience provoked her to think that death was not an ending but a cycling and recycling of energy. Death did not mean a separation from her father but a connection with him through a continuation of his energy.

Judith did not consider herself to be a religious person in a Christian sense, as she did not believe that life was black and white; instead she described herself as a spiritual person. Imagining was a way of being connected with her own spiritual strength, a strength within and beyond.

I think that death gives you a whole view of the world. You see the whole thing, whether there is a heaven or whether it’s your energy continuing on and being part of the energy, or whether... your body becomes a part of the ground, which then becomes part of the earth. Although I tend to think more that somehow there is a continuation of your energy and who you are.

Life for Judith was the “bigger picture,” which meant being part of the whole, a sense of oneness with life. In her words, “Like people get sick, and people die, and your car breaks down, and those kind of things. But not to lose the bigger picture I think is important.”

Mishaps and loss were transcended by having faith and trust that particular events could be overcome. For example, Judith did not harbor or dwell on unexpected expenses. Accepting and responding in a practical way to unforseen events or circumstances paved the way for transcendence to occur. She described how she dealt with an unforseen expense in a matter of fact way: “Something happened and now I owe an extra 150 bucks. I just try to write the check, send it
off as fast as I can, and not think about it because you can get yourself so caught up in that, you know.”

Transcending the ordinary to find meaning occurred when Judith recollected a favorite book of sayings about how persons create their own life. Her belief was that she could create her own life (not only a different future but a different past) by changing her perception of what happened. Judith’s recollection facilitated movement towards recovery from a separation and divorce and reintegration of self and family. She explained,

In the past, I might of said, “Geez, my marriage didn’t work out, and I’m not a very good person in relationships, and I’m this and I’m that.” Or you can change that perception and say, “I had a relationship that ended; it didn’t work out; and look how much I have learned from that; how much stronger I am; and how much more I have come to understand myself by going through that kind of process.”

**Ann.** Ann’s art collection of women and children painted by a native Canadian woman evoked a discussion about her own spiritual strength and strength gained from a higher power. The artwork transcended the mundane of life when Ann discussed how the pictures talked to her about “light, hope, and strength.”

Although Ann and her family attended church regularly, she considered herself to be a spiritual person rather than a religious person. Attending church provided a respite from the ordinary world, a place in which Ann experienced moments of illumination of wisdom and peace, a place in which she felt connected to the larger scheme of things, and a place in which she appreciated a higher power that gave her strength to transcend difficulties in life. She said,
I feel that . . . there is some big guy up there somewhere. Somebody has got to be watching over me because God knows I couldn’t have gone through all the things [laughs] that I have gone through on my own.

Ann’s spiritual search for unity and harmony was experienced within the community of the church and within her family. A sense of the communal transcendence her sense of separation and being on her own, and it gave her strength to continue on and live life in a single-parent family situation.

Part of going to church is that it’s a community of people who, we may be weak by ourselves, but as a group we are a team and [pause] maybe that’s how our family operates. Each individual maybe not so strong but all of us together, we are quite strong.

Lynn. Lynn’s deep expression of her inner spirit came from a creative experience from working with clay. She became connected with her wholeness and, in doing so, she transcended challenges of a future career change and a move to a new city. She struggled for words as she used symbolism to describe her project, “It has to come from the seed and come outward like a flower, and it becomes a form. [Pause] . . . Well, it defeats itself; [Pause] it’s quite abstract.”

Financial problems were transcended by having faith and trust that somehow these difficulties could be overcome. Accepting and responding in a practical way assisted Lynn to rise above her financial problems. In a matter of fact way, she stated, “I have a bit of money and then I cash that in. . . . Different things like that come along so that I can catch up; and then I go on, and then I get in the hole again, and then I catch up.”

Susan. Susan reflected upon her spiritual development by recognizing and
accepting her connection to a spiritual force in the universe. As a young child
growing up in an abusive home, Susan sought spiritual comfort by secretively
reading a little red Bible under the bed covers at night. However, as she became
older, Susan doubted the presence of a God. She questioned why God would give
life to an abusive mother. In later years, her spiritual beliefs changed; she became
more open and accepting of her struggle in life by believing that life was a test and
in life things happen for a reason. Her strength to survive emanated from
believing that if one could find the why of living one could transcend the how.
The following two excerpts speak to the essence of Susan’s purpose and meaning
in life. In her own words, Susan said,

And then as I got older, I thought some day everybody is going to
meet their maker and they are going to be judged. Even she
[mother] is going to have hers. . . . Then I got to believing. I’m
not an overly religious person, but I do have my strong beliefs that
things in life happen for a reason. People were born into this world
ignorant and through that ignorance life is their test. They will
either pass or fail it, but they don’t know that until it is over; and it
is through those years that you learn for yourself and you find out
for yourself. You have to learn on your own. And that’s where the
survival instinct comes in.

In life we eventually walk the same road yet some of us take
shortcuts or the long way around the road, . . . each with our new
and unique experiences. But in the end we all meet on the other
side of the road, which we do. Doesn’t matter how you get around
it; you are still going to meet there.

Believing and having faith that financial difficulties can be surmounted
connected Susan to a higher power. Susan rose above the adversity of life by
connecting to a spiritual life force, a force that could not be explained.
Something always happens to get me out of that spot. Don’t ask me what it is, but it is. I don’t say it is a fluke; I say it is looking out for the little guy because it has always worked that way. We have come right down to the line of having no food, no money, nothing, and then something automatically happens. I either get a check or somebody will lend me some money or whatever; but it always seems to work out.

Cocreating Family Harmony

According to Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary, the definition of create is to “bring into existence . . . to invest with a new form” (Woolf, 1976, p. 267), whereas harmony is “a fitting together of parts so as to form a connected whole . . . (mus) a simultaneous combination of accordant sounds” (Macdonald, 1965, p. 282). According to Greek mythology, Harmonia was born out of strife and love, thus creating order (Jobes, 1962). Tracing the word to 1879, harmony is “the simultaneous sounding of several notes, it includes concords and discords” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1259). Metaphorically speaking, the family is like a symphony; each musician is capable of playing individual notes that come together and produce a collective of harmonic sounds. Within harmony there are high-pitched and low-pitched sounds, soft and hard sounds that blend to create a melody.

For the mothers in this study, family harmony was best illustrated by mutual pleasure in time spent together with their children, which gave their children a sense of being valued as individuals and as a collective. Being valued meant that family members’ voices of accord, as well voices of discord, were listened to. Spending time with their children did not necessarily mean finding
family fulfillment outside the home; activities within the home were less expensive and tapped the creativity of mothers and children. However, when children were asked what they liked to do as a family, they most often included activities outside the home.

Judith and Melody. Judith derived pleasure in her relationship with her daughter, Melody, because there is “just the two of us”; she deemed this as “special.” Mutual pleasure was enhanced because Judith believed that Melody was similar in personality; she described them as being “social, talkative, and liked to have a lot of fun.” The following excerpt describes the comfortable relationship that Judith has with her daughter. For example, at times Melody will crawl into bed in the morning with her mother to discuss the plans for the day.

We were laying there, you know, laying there yakking to each other, and I was rubbing her back, and I thought this is very special because there is just the two of us, and we know each other so well.

Another important factor in this relationship was that Melody is an only child, which provided numerous opportunities to socialize and negotiate the world with other adults. For example, Judith would take Melody with her to restaurants and other social engagements as a way of getting out. Judith’s friends enjoyed her daughter’s company and often praised her for being so well-behaved. However, at times when Melody did misbehave, the conflict would be resolved by discussing the differences of opinion.

Judith did not believe she treated her daughter “like an adult”; however, Melody was able to communicate effectively with adults. She commented that
Melody would use words that were "quite adult, words to get specifically at information." The relationship that Judith had with her daughter was person-to-person, rather than adult-to-adult.

Melody's view of her relationship with her mother was friendship that entailed enjoyment in their sharing. Sharing within the friendship consisted of talking, cooking, going to movies together, going on walks together, and having Christmas with extended family. Friendship also meant that one could have disagreements but still get along with one another. Friendship was defined through the topics discussed and the activities undertaken. In her own words, Melody described her relationship with her mother.

Well, we get into fights once in a while, but me and my mom have built a good friendship. We get along really good as long as I don't leave a mess for her to clean or get her in a bad mood, and stuff like that.

**Ann, Nancy, and Bob.** Ann and her children, Nancy and Bob, live a more harmonious life following the separation from her husband. Ann described her family as doing family activities as a unit to create and celebrate a "real sense of community, a real sense of belonging in the family." A sense of belonging was created by spending time together in activities such as skating, going to movies and live theater, and bowling. Activities that did not cost any money were valued and enjoyed by family members as well. For example, Ann talked about picnics on the floor in the family room, sleepovers in mommy's bed, and trips to the SPCA and local pet store to look at the animals. Because money was at a premium in this family, the children were encouraged to create their own enjoyment by building
cars and houses out of cardboard. According to Ann, the children needed pencils, paper, erasers, glue, and boxes in order to have a good time.

From the children’s point of view, living in their home is less conflict-ridden and more harmonious since their father left. In particular, Nancy made sense of her parents’ separation by believing that her father had a “kind of brain sickness that made him think only of himself and his job,” which was to the detriment of the family. She went on to say that hearing her parents fight hurt her a great deal; however, the family atmosphere has improved somewhat because she does not hear as many fights. In fact, she described her family as having a “good sense of humor and the ability to laugh at just about anything.” When I asked, “Nancy, what do you wish for your family?” she responded, “I want my family to be really happy,” [and] “I don’t want my mom to lose her sense of humor.” Nancy also believed that it was important to be nice to one another, and demonstrating acceptance was accomplished by complimenting family members once a day.

Bob felt accepted when his family members helped him with difficult tasks such as “cutting an apple” or “getting his hamster out of high places.” He also felt more comfortable when his family was not fighting.

**Lynn, Shane, and Elizabeth.** Harmony in Lynn’s home was experienced by organizing time for herself and her children. For example, when she was a university student, she did not study until the children were in bed and on weekends time was devoted to the family. Not only was she able to schedule time
for her children, but she was able to build in exercise time for her own enjoyment. Leisure time at home was spent by renting a movie and having popcorn or playing board games. Outdoor pursuits consisted of hiking with her two children.

Spending time at home meant talking with her children, preferably on a one-to-one basis. The following quote illustrates the value Lynn places on communicating with her children: “I have always felt that one-on-one is important in this time together. I know when they start acting up I need to spend more time with them. That is the first thing that I do differently.”

Shane and Elizabeth valued the time they spent together as a family to the extent that they wished they could see their mother more frequently. On occasion Lynn worked shifts at a hospital and, consequently, the children went to a babysitter after school. On Sundays the children spent the day with their father and his new family. Family activities that the children found enjoyable were “swimming, skating, playing with the cat after school, and going to movies.”

It was important for Shane and Elizabeth to have a home that was relatively free of conflict. However, sibling rivalry was experienced, and disciplinary action was taken when necessary for yelling and hitting. For example, Shane was asked, “What do you like most about your family?” He replied, “That we get along. We don’t have big fights and stuff.” However, he did admit that he got into trouble for “yelling and bugging his sister.” He divulged that he was disciplined for this behavior, and his sister also received discipline for aggressive behavior. Shane said, “Mom is trying to teach . . . my sister not to hit and to work out her
Problems.” On the other hand, he believed his sister was “nice” and kept him company when there was no one else to play with. Elizabeth’s view of her brother was that he was “nice sometimes” but also “bugged” her at times.

**Susan, Angela, Lori, and Bekki.** Susan experienced a sense of cohesiveness with her daughters (Angela, Lori, and Bekki), which was a cohesive unit that was not to be separated or divided. For example, after her separation from her husband, the father requested visiting privileges for only the oldest daughter. Susan responded to her ex-husband in the following way: “I said no, you take them all or you can’t see any of them; you don’t separate them or you don’t divide them.” She continued, “They are all together, and now they are all really close.”

Cohesiveness within this family unit did not mean there was not room for conflict; conflict coexisted with a sense of closeness. Susan described the conflict and the closeness in the family with the following illustration:

We fight like cats and dogs, but there is that closeness there. When my middle daughter, Lori, stays overnight at somebody’s house, there is not a time that she doesn’t call long distance on their phone to say good night . . . and say, “I miss you mom.”

Lori and Bekki, the two youngest children in the family, enjoyed going to the store, playing cards, swimming, riding bikes, and going to concerts with their family. In particular, a highlight for them was attending Angela’s musical concert to hear her play in the school band. A sense of pride was evident as they agreed that Angela’s “songs were the best.” When Lori was asked, “What do you like about your family?,” she replied, “They like me and I like them.”
The oldest daughter, Angela, liked to spend a lot of time with her family as she said, “I don’t know why, I just do.” Spending time with her family meant “watching movies, playing games, and talking.” She also assumed more responsibilities in the family, which did not seem to overburden her. She was particularly proud of her mother going back to school and summed up her relationship with her mom by saying, “She has always been there.”

**Sharing Family Power**

The meaning of “sharing power” includes the following: (a) Sharing is “to partake of, use, experience, or enjoy with others” (Woolf, 1976, p. 1066); and (b) power is a derivative of Latin (“posse, potesse, be able,” the “force [energy], effort, strength” exerted in the “ability to act” or the “ability to respond and/or resist”) (Angeles, 1992, p. 237).

Among the mothers and children, the essential theme of sharing family power was enacted within a nonhierarchical, process-oriented family structure. Power was power with rather than power over. In other words, family decisions and family problem solving were encountered and managed through accommodation by mothers and their children.

**Judith and Melody.** Judith’s description of her relationship with her daughter, Melody, was that of an “equal relationship,” equal in the sense that Judith negotiated directly with her daughter about family issues for mutual gain. Judith believed that in a traditional family “parents have to negotiate and come to terms what they think should be right, . . . or what to do in certain situations.” In
solo parenting, there is direct contact with the child, and it is the relationship with the child that is important rather than contact with another adult. Furthermore, Judith believed that “life was not hard-and-fast rules.” For example, Judith said, “I have tried being firm, and I have tried using stars for rewards; these things worked only for a short period of time.”

Judith and Melody’s relationship consisted of a back-and-forth flow of talking and listening, respecting and accepting each other as human beings, and a decision-making process in which agreements were reached for mutual benefit. The following scenario captures talking and listening that occurred as Judith and Melody reached consensus regarding the appropriate amount of television time for Melody after school. Judith recounted,

I [Judith] said to her, “I’m concerned about how much time you watch TV, what do you think?” and she said, well that she did watch a lot, and I said, “I think we need to talk about this . . . and come to an agreement together about how much TV is appropriate for you to watch at night.” So we sat down and talked about it.

After much discussion, Judith and Melody decided that Melody could watch TV for an hour after school. Decisions were based on what was deemed appropriate from the mother’s viewpoint and what was considered reasonable from the child’s position. Judith talked about not feeling guilty because the decisions were owned mutually. Also, Judith believed that within the negotiation process, Melody could make her needs known without being aggressive. For example, since Melody’s television time was reduced, she requested that her mother spend more time with her.
Ann, Nancy, and Bob. Ann’s relationship with her children was one of sharing power; that is, both sides of an issue were listened to and an openness and talking about feelings and ideas were encouraged. Brainstorming was most often used to reach consensus on an issue. Issues were brought up by anyone on an ad hoc basis at the dinner table; but if an issue was volatile, discussion occurred at a later time. Ann stated, “We have an open forum in this house; if they want to talk about anything, they [children] can whether that is divorce or sex or whatever.”

Ann recounted a poignant example of sharing power with her son. Bob had wanted a snake for a pet, much to the revulsion of his mother. Ann decided to “strike up a deal” with Bob and let him have a snake if he would stay focused on tasks at school—something she believed would not be easy to accomplish. Much to her surprise, the teacher reported that Bob had made significant improvements at school and, as a result, Bob received a snake for a pet that afternoon.

Lynn, Shane, and Elizabeth. Lynn’s description of family strength clearly explicated the nonhierarchical process of sharing power within the family. She alluded that she was the “parenting authority” that reduced the amount of conflict in the family since she did not have to consult with another adult about decisions regarding child care. Instead, decisions that affected the children occurred at the parent-child level in a back-and-forth flow of talk with respect for the child’s and mother’s point of view. Both voices were heard for the mutual gain of family members. The following exemplar describes a decision-making process between Lynn and Shane regarding a later bedtime:
Shane wanted to stay up later the other night, so he pleaded his case to stay up later and not be grouchy the next morning. So I said, "Okay, fine, you try and go to bed 15 minutes later, and we will see how it works the next morning. If there are problems, we will go back to the old bedtime." . . . I give them lots of room that way.

**Susan, Angela, Lori, and Bekki.** Susan reflected on her childhood experience of powerlessness in her family of origin, which was in contrast to shared power with her own daughters. Despite Susan’s lack of power in her own family of origin, she believed that children are entitled to “freedom of speech”; that is, children should be listened to with respect, and their decisions should be honored. The following illustration speaks to the difference in the way that Susan experienced power within her family of origin compared to the extent that her eldest daughter, Angela, experienced power:

She [Angela] can come to me and I will let her argue with me, whereas I didn’t do that. I saw the backhand of a fist coming at my face, and it didn’t matter if I told the truth or lied; I was still wrong.

Stemming from the lack of power in Susan’s childhood, she is determined to teach her children to be assertive and stand up for their rights so that they can have a better life than her own. It is her belief that children “have the same privileges” as adults. For example, “They have to be able to come back at you and say, well, mom, you didn’t do this and you didn’t do that.” The emphasis was on a nonhierarchical, participatory form of family interaction.

The relationships with her daughters were mutually empowering; that is, there was giving and taking, talking, listening, and responding. There was a sense of being on equal ground with certain expectations that her daughters’ lives would
be better than her own life. For example, when I asked, “Where do you want your family to be 5 years from now?” Susan responded, “I want my kids to be where they want to be 5 years from now not where I want them to be. That is their choice, not mine. . . . But if they are on the street, I will drag them back home.”

**Humane Family Connecting**

According to *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, humane is defined as “compassion, sympathy, or consideration for other human beings or animals” (Woolf, 1976, p. 556). The verb connect is defined in the following way, “to tie or fasten: to establish a relation between”; whereas the noun connection is defined as “a body or society held together by a bond” (Macdonald, 1965, p. 126). In other words, humane family connecting means that there is a strong consideration for individual identities of family members and love for animals and at the same time a strong sense of the family bond. Family bonding paves the way for a sense of being together with security and continuity.

**Judith and Melody.** Finding meaning in humane connecting was a strength for Judith and her daughter, Melody. Establishing connections with one another was a valued way of being and becoming, a way of growing, unfolding, and relating. Judith described her relationship with her daughter as “something that enhances my life,” and “something that balances my life,” “something that is such a consideration in my life,” “something that makes me feel very, very, lucky.” Melody, on the other hand, described her relationship with her mother as
“a good friendship.” In the following excerpt, Judith described how she felt about Melody after she returned home from a long day at classes in her master’s program. She said,

It was so nice to go home. Melody would be waiting; she had not seen me during the day because she didn’t get home from school [until] after I had left for class. This wonderful little girl just loved you for being her mother. You didn’t have to be smarter or brighter or challenge yourself more . . . ; she just loved me for being who I am.

Melody has developed a trusting relationship with her mother, as demonstrated by her openness in sharing circumstances that Judith would not have told her own mother. For example, Judith was amazed at Melody’s honesty about events that were considered wrong in both their eyes. Through their openness, Judith and Melody were able to maintain an intimate connection; both mother and daughter were free to be who they really are. By their openness, mother and daughter can “stand with another soul” (Estes, 1992, p. 120) and feel a sense of security, a movement towards wholeness rather than a sense of brokenness.

One of Judith’s beliefs was that it was necessary for children “to feel loved and to feel safe.” She also believed that losing a parent may result in a child feeling unsafe and insecure. In order to prevent untoward insecurity within Melody, Judith did not move initially from their home following her divorce; but when they did move, Judith brought a cat home to assist Melody with the transition. The cat became a full-fledged member of the family, a companion, and a playmate for Melody. In addition, family routines were kept consistent as much as possible. Also keeping traditions alive from the family of origin provided them
with a sense of constancy and continuity. Judith relayed, “On Christmas we always listen to the same Christmas music, and we go to the same place every year to get a Christmas tree... My dad was the maker and keeper of those traditions.”

Transmission of the family’s awareness of itself was evident as Melody revealed her connection to the past, which reaffirmed the thread of continuity. Her great-grandfather’s watch will be passed on to her when her mother is 60 years old. The following story is Melody’s description of her connection to her family history:

My old grandpa has a watch; he was a train person; and it was passed on to him, to grandma, to mom, and then it will be passed on to me. When I get older and my mom is 60, I will have that watch to keep time and everything... [The watch] is probably about 100 years old; it is really special; and it makes me think about my grandpa.

Melody was able to express her view of the family by describing her family drawing (see Appendix F). Using the family drawing as a point of reference, Melody began her description of her own identity and her family’s identity.

This is me; I have brown hair, blue eyes, and I like to skip and play hide and seek and stuff. This is “Big Guy” my cat. He is sort of a tiger color cat. He is green-eyed, and he is yellow and orange. He can be quite grumpy at times. This is my mom; she has brown eyes and she wears pretty clothes; her favorite color is red. This is my kitten, “Fluffy Duke.” He is just a kitten, and he is grey, white, and black. He is a nuisance once in a while.

Judith and Melody recently moved to a new neighborhood; consequently, Judith has given Melody a kitten to assist her in this new transition. Melody talked about her close relationship with her kitten.
Well, he is nice, but he chases "Big Guy" once in a while. He just pounces on him, and bites him, and he digs his claws into him. When I wake up, he's right at the foot of my bed. He's fluffy, and he's cuddly, and [sighs] he's the only friend I have that is really close to me.

Following the description of the family drawing, Melody talked about her grandparents and her cousins as being a part of her family. With some sadness, she voiced love for her grandparents; her grandfather was sick with cancer, and her grandmother was afflicted with arthritis. Melody described her grandfather as owning a farm, presently confined to a "wheelchair with a big tube," and unable to swallow vitamins because "his stomach couldn't digest food." She described her grandmother as "a good cook; she can make great spaghetti." When I specifically asked Melody what she liked about her family, she replied, "We are close and we have a friendship and everything. We love each other and care for each other."

Closeness was giving and receiving emotional nourishment, which connected mother and daughter to feelings and values within the family. The mother is whole, gives wholeness, and expects it from the child, thus creating a sense of family unity. For example, Judith described Melody's perceptions with regard to her mother's feelings about her boyfriend's upcoming sailing trip and her accuracy with her mother's philosophy of life. Reflecting on her conversation with her daughter, she said,

I said to her, "How do you think I feel about Brian going sailing?" She [Melody] told me word-for-word how I was feeling. [Laughs] She said, "I think that you are sad that he is leaving, and you wonder about your relationship with him because he will be gone a long time. You think that Brian needs to do this. . . . You think that it is important for people to go and do the things that they need
to do.” And I [Judith] thought that’s it, that is what I want to teach her. I want to teach her to care about herself, not to limit herself, and to live her dreams.

Melody conceived of her family in an expansive way; her family was comprised of her mother, her cats, her grandparents, and her aunts and cousins. By giving human qualities to her cats, the pets conveyed love, security, and mutual affiliation within the family. The open and trusting relationships within the immediate family and extended family were sources of love, security, and continuity; they constellated a movement towards wholeness rather than a sense of brokenness.

**Ann, Nancy, and Bob.** Humane connecting for Ann and her children was embodied in openness, trust, and reaching out to unite with each other and to connect with a camaraderie of pets. This connectedness coexisted with the belief that individuals could stand on their own. The following quotes illustrate the separateness and closeness between the children and the unity that is experienced:

They [Nancy and Bob] are very independent of each other; however, they are very close to each other when the chips are down.

They [Nancy and Bob] are very cooperative with each other, but they can be at odds with each other; however, the bottom line is that they are family.

When they [Nancy and Bob] are coming home on the bus, sometimes Nancy misses the bus and Bob will not be aware of that until he gets home; then he realizes that she is not getting off the bus. So they look out for each other, but they don’t run each other’s lives.

Ann described her children as “very warm,” with “good hearts,” yet they were able to “speak their minds.” With confidence she said, “I think that I have
two really fine kids that are going to do just fine on their own, whenever they get on their own.” Trust was an important feature in her relationship with her children. She stated, “My children have built up enough faith in me that they can talk to me about anything... I have never lied to them, and I have never told them stories.”

Her daughter verified her trust in her mother; she described that she talked to her mother about her problems. When her mother could not help her, Nancy wrote her concerns in her diary.

Communicating openly was valued within the family. Ann acknowledged this belief with the following illustration:

They have always been able to talk to me about things, and we have always been able to talk to each other; even if it is yelling and screaming at each other, there is never a lack of communication. I don’t believe in the silent treatment, ... because you don’t get anywhere. You don’t get anything solved; even if you are yelling you are getting your feelings out... I’m really big on how they feel. I try to always pump up their self-esteem and work on their strengths rather than pointing out their weaknesses.

According to Ann, she has a different relationship with each child. For example, despite her daughter’s moodiness, they were able to connect “intellectually” and “spiritually.” On the other hand, Nancy described her mother as “special” and having a “good sense of humor.” Comparatively speaking, Ann’s relationship with her son is close but conflictual at times. For example, she stated, “He can get really under my skin because often times he is 7 going on 17, but he has a really good heart.” Bob described his relationship with his mother in the following way: “She is quite nice; sometimes she is not that nice to me but most
of the time she is nice.”

Healing the brokenness in the family was uppermost in Ann’s mind. She enrolled the children in courses that dealt with losses associated with divorce, initiated counselling for her daughter, and integrated numerous pets into the family constellation. Pets were a significant healing force within the family, as depicted in the children’s drawings of their family (see Appendix G).

The children’s drawings depicted the immediate family and their numerous pets. The father was notably absent from their drawings; however, in my discussion with the children, they mentioned their father relative to the material gifts he had bestowed upon them. Nancy had “mixed-up” feelings about “losing” her dad because he made promises that he did not keep; furthermore, he was contemplating a move to Europe. Nancy said, “It would mean that I would lose my dad, but in my heart he would not be gone. He would be far away.” Nancy dealt with her losses by turning inward; for example, she wrote in her diary, wrote plays and poems, kept a journal about her dreams, and was in counselling. Her world consisted of her friends, a collection of porcelain dolls, and love for her family and pets. Nancy’s three wishes for her family encompassed harmony and expansion of the family to include a father. For example, she stated:

Maybe a new dad because my mom has a new boyfriend. . . . They are really good friends, and I’m hoping that someday they will get married. So I will have a dad and a stepsister. [In her next breath, she changes her mind.] It doesn’t really matter if they get married because I’m really happy the way I am. Probably number two would be that [pauses] I have a really happy family . . . [pauses] probably that my mother does not lose her sense of humor.
In her wisdom, Ann facilitated Bob’s growth and healing by incorporating her male friends into his network to assist him with building projects. Pictures of Bob were kept in a separate album, and numerous pets were integrated into the family. Bob’s interests were collecting hockey cards, playing with his friends, and building homes for his hamsters. Bob loved pets; he had a special fondness for snakes because he could predict where “they were going” by watching their eyes. He said that his snake was “quite vicious but most of the time he was a sleepy head.” When his pet snake died, he talked his mother into putting it in the freezer so he could bury his pet in the spring. Pets provided Bob with the experience of growth, separation, and loss that were an important part of his life (see Appendix G). Pets also provided companionship for him, which decreased his separateness while providing security. Bob’s wishes for his family were harmony and security, for example, a “boa constrictor,” “lots of money,” and “we don’t fight.”

Lynn, Shane, and Elizabeth. Humane connecting for Lynn and her children embraced openness with honesty, trusting and honoring differences, yet being bound by love. Lynn described her caring relationship with her children as being present in the here and now, the past and the future. She elaborated, “I think they [children] feel loved, and they feel that I will be there for them. I am there for them, I always will be, and I always have been.”

Connecting with her children was accepting and appreciating the differences in their personalities. When discussing her son, she described him as “sensitive,” “responsible,” and “trustworthy.” She elaborated, “He is an average student with
lots of friends.” Lynn described her relationship with Shane, “He is open with me. We can talk about things. Sometimes it takes him a little while to come out with what is bothering him, but he talks about it eventually.”

When asked about her relationship with her younger daughter Elizabeth, Lynn immediately responded, “She is different.” The following excerpt speaks to the differences and her ability to individuate her children and love them for who they are:

She is a more carefree child. She doesn’t take on the responsibilities. Like Shane will worry about things, Elizabeth doesn’t worry. She is more of a quiet person, less social than Shane, although it is changing as she gets older. But she is more of a one-to-one, and she will play by herself more than Shane ever did. I do not know if she is as open.

Elizabeth and Shane visited their father every weekend. According to the children, their father’s home life was chaotic and conflictual. Lynn noted that when the children returned home they were usually “wound up.” Lynn did not criticize her ex-husband’s lifestyle; instead she provided ways for the children to readjust to a calmer environment and their family routines. The children were encouraged to take a bath, watch television, or play a game before going to bed. In Lynn’s estimation, these were ways of providing security and safety.

The children’s family drawings depicted their mother and themselves, even though they spent every weekend with their father and his new family (see Appendix H). Shane clarified that the drawing is a family portrait of “the family I see most often.” He went on to say that if he drew his whole family, “I would have two brothers, three stepbrothers, [and] one half-brother. If I drew my sisters,
I would have my real sister, stepsister, half-sister, stepmom, and two dads."

However, when asked who he would take to Mars with him, Shane responded "my cat, my sister, half-sister, half-brother, and my mom or dad." His affinity for the family narrowed to include blood-related relatives and his cat. When Shane talked about his cat, he divulged that his family had another cat but he had disappeared and that his present cat was going to have kittens. The pet cat provided Shane with the experiences of birth, separation, and loss—all parts of life.

His three wishes for his family were for continuity and security. In his own words, his wishes were as follows: "We live forever, we get rich, and the whole family lives together."

When I asked Elizabeth to describe her family drawing, she said, "That's my mom, and Shane, and me, and the sun saying hello" (see Appendix H). To further this basic description of her family, Elizabeth talked about how much she enjoyed being at her father’s home because there were babies to play with. She was looking forward to a trip to Disneyland with her grandmother and her brother.

After school, her pet cat who was her playmate provided her with companionship. She described her cat in the following way: "She is crazy. She will do anything, like you put her upside down, she will sit there like nothing has happened."

When asked who and what she would take with her on a trip to a desert island, Elizabeth responded without hesitation, "I would take my cat, my brother, my mom and dad." [Prompt: What would you do when you got there?] "I would
keep my cat out of the sun because cats do not like hot places.”

Elizabeth’s three wishes for her family were “I wish my family would never die, and the people in my family that died would come back to life, and we would always be together.”

Although Elizabeth excluded her father and her cat from the family drawing, her relationships with them were significant in her life. She liked her dad because he took her places. Her cat expanded her world of caring and decreased loneliness while providing constancy and security. Her wishes for her family reflected her need for continuity and security.

Humane connecting for Lynn and her children denoted strength in togetherness with the open, trusting relationships within the immediate family and the connections with her ex-husband’s family. Wholeness embraced relationships with the immediate family, the extended family, and the animal kingdom, which gave them a sense of security and continuity.

**Susan, Angela, Lori, and Bekki.** Susan believed that open communication and trusting relationships within the family were the key in their search for unity and security. In her estimation, her home was a safe “haven,” but outside their home there were many risks from which she needed to protect her children. Listening to her children without prejudging was important to maintain trust and openness, thus creating a family bond and a sense of security and continuity. For example,
A kid has to know that she will be okay to come home and say this happened and that happened and have that advantage of talking to the parent without the parent going down the throat for it. That is the bond.

If that kid can come home after she is married and say this is what has been happening and you are there for them, that is safe.

Susan captured the experience of connection with her daughters by contacting her playful inner child, thus opening the channels of communication. Family vitality was experienced with playful energy such as teasing and kidding with one another. Experiencing the union with her children was a feeling for the other, as a child, something that could not be easily explained. Susan said, "Emotionally, I look like a bag on the outside, but the inside is totally different." Inside was a gentle, playful spirit waiting to be accepted fully.

Expressions of love were not outwardly demonstrated; for example, in reference to her older daughter, Susan stated, "She knows that I love her, but I don’t always show it." Being there for her children meant that she would be there for them when they “wake up at 3 in the morning with a bad nightmare” or “when they fall off their bikes.” In Susan’s estimation, merely providing financial resources was not considered being there for family members.

Susan believed, “Life is what you teach your kids.” Honesty, sharing, responsibility, self-reliance, and assertiveness were family values that she espoused. Honesty and openness were crucial to a valued friendship. For example, “I teach my own daughter that if you cannot be honest enough with a friend, then you don’t have one.”
Sharing within the family was something to be cherished. Susan commented: “I have always tried to teach these kids that in order to be a family, families help each other; and if you don’t help each other, then there is no family.” In contrast, she also wanted her daughters to be self-reliant. She said, “I want my kids to be independent. I want them to be on their own. If they have to be on their own, I don’t want them to have to rely on men.” Susan tried to teach her children to be aware of their own power and vulnerability, to stand up for themselves, and, if necessary, admit defeat. Susan reiterated:

I don’t want my kids growing up . . . where they are going to stand there and actually let somebody verbally abuse them and take it. I have tried to teach them, if they are right, you go for the throat; do not let anybody talk you down. If you are right, you argue right to the end; but if you are wrong, do not be afraid to say I made a mistake.

Angela, the eldest daughter, described her mother as someone who has “always been there.” She was proud of her mother returning to school and recognized her mother’s parenting abilities by saying, “I think she has done a good job in raising us.” Her mother’s humanness was acknowledged by Angela when she said, “My mother has made mistakes, but she is trying to fix them.” The younger daughters, Lori and Bekki, were succinct in their description of their mother as each child said, “She is nice.” Bekki added, “My mom likes it when you talk to her and when she doesn’t have homework on the weekend.” Furthermore, she described her mother as the disciplinarian; for example, she said, “She grounds us when we are bad.” Lori’s viewpoint of “being bad” was disobeying rules about appropriate bedtimes.
The children’s drawings depicted similarities in the family structure. Each child included the immediate family with the exception of the oldest child who also included her mother’s boyfriend in the family constellation (see Appendix I). Angela was 5 years old when her parents separated and remembers her father, whereas Lori and Bekki have little memory of their father because they were 18 months and 6 months, respectively, when their parents separated. Angela described her father as “kind of part of the family but doesn’t have anything to do with it.” Since her father is musically talented, and Angela plays a base clarinet, she believed her talent was inherited from her father. In her mind, she was genetically connected to her father. Furthermore, she described her mother’s boyfriend “not like a dad; he takes you places and does stuff with you.” Susan has been in a relationship with her boyfriend for 3 years with no intention of marrying him. She does want to show the children that a relationship can last.

Pets appear to be part of this family, as two of the children included them in their drawing (see Appendix I) and conversed about them with me. Bekki, the youngest child, described one of the cats as her playmate and the other cat was not as friendly as it just wanted to be left alone. Angela, the eldest child, described other cats they had owned and lost. The present cats offered her companionship and comfort with touching.

Angela and Bekki hoped for material security for their family. In her own words, Bekki stated that her three wishes for her family were “live in a big house, more money than we have right now, and more food.” Angela stated that her
wishes for her family were “nice house, not too big or too small; enough money to get by until mom finishes school; mom would get a job; and eventually I would get a job.” Conversely, Lori hoped for acceptance and closer connectedness to people. She said that “she wanted her family to be pretty, lots of boys like my sister, and live closer to [her mother’s boyfriend mother] Cheryl.”

The children varied in their responses to my inquiry about, “Who would you take on a trip to Mars?” For instance, Bekki, the youngest child, only wanted to take Lori on the trip because she “gives me nice things.” On the other hand, Lori expanded her connectedness by wanting to take the family, her next-door neighbor, and her boyfriend. She revealed that she wanted to take her boyfriend because he was “nice, and he shares stuff.” Finally, Angela requested that her mother, her mother’s boyfriend, and her two sisters go to a quiet place with her such as a “great big forest or maybe up in the mountains.”

Experiencing the existence of human connectedness was invoked by opening the channels of communication, trusting the child within, and sharing love for one another. Healing the child within moved the family to greater wholeness.

**Fundamental Structure of Family Strength**

The phenomenon of family strength involved being in relation with self and others. Individuals in a family are a part of one another; yet they do not lose their separateness, as relationships with self and others can be a source of strength.

Introspecting enabled the women to become connected to their separate inner selves, thus discovering their humanness. Introspecting involved looking
inward to discover their essential nature as women in conjunction with their mothering selves. Looking inward provided a mirror to the self without distractive images from the outer world. The mirror enabled these women to see themselves clearly in their own reflection. Centering on themselves without distraction provided access to the stillness of the separate self. Within the stillness of the self, these women were able to accept their true feelings, limitations, creative imagination, personal growth, and purpose in life. Periods of tranquillity renewed and strengthened these women to be and become.

Emoting was a way of experiencing the authentic self, a feeling self in all its profundity. The women identified their innermost emotional experience, and they accepted these feelings as a true barometer of who they were and what they represented. Emotions were experienced in an inviting and knowing way—a way that facilitated knowing the deeper parts of themselves. Knowing the deeper parts of themselves involved entering a deep, dark place—a center of things. The descent into darkness illuminated their pain, sadness, and vulnerability—a process that touched their strength. As feelings emanated from their beings and were uniquely experienced, self-understanding grew and true strength emerged.

Knowing the human condition grew out of knowing self in relation to others. Knowing themselves was ineffable yet communicable—ineffable in the sense that the women's connections to themselves and their children could not be expressed in words but only felt. Knowing their children were being with them. Feelings were private and indescribable. On the other hand, knowing was
communicable when these women paid attention to their experiences, knowledge, and intuition. Awareness, receptivity, and responsivity to inner feelings, inner seeing, and inner hearing assisted these women in their own growth and healing and the growth and healing of their children.

Knowing was invisible yet visible and understandable yet mystical. Life changes were created by visioning and affirming possibilities for the future. Imaging, affirming, and creating were used to envision the growth and healing process for these women. Invisibility was manifested when the women attracted people, circumstances, and conditions into their lives that brought their vision to fruition. Somehow the right circumstances and conditions appeared mysteriously to support their being and becoming. Living the mystery of life entailed trusting the unknown and their own inner authority.

Discovering freedom enabled the women to develop a sense of self by being autonomous, determined, and reliant, thus creating a destiny for themselves and a future for their children. Freedom to be and become meant making choices that fit the women’s own personal needs, desires, and goals. Being in charge of their lives was a freeing experience, as they defied what seemed to be oppressive external constraints. Because there was no father or husband to consult about parenting issues or other family matters, these women developed determination and reliance to “go it alone.” Going it alone gave the women opportunities to create and change their own lives and the lives of their children.

Responsibility for solo parenting opened up new levels of self-
understanding, reliance on oneself to go it alone, and a determination to parent in a way that was consistent with one’s own value system. The women were able to step out of traditional family roles and make judgments about changes in their lives based on their own inner strengths. MacNeil (1986), a single parent and a Canadian music singer and composer, illustrated the essence of inner strength in the following chorus:

And when you know the wings you ride
Can keep you in the sky
There isn’t anyone holding back you
First you stumble then you fall
You reach out and you fly
There isn’t anything that you can’t do.

Generally speaking, these women marched to the tune of their own drums with reliance and determination to make life better for themselves and their children. Paraphrasing the works of William Shakespeare, the women’s souls needed elbow room to be and become who they wanted to be.

The essential theme of gaining resilience involved waiting patiently and pushing forward to accept and weather life’s challenges, losses, and transitions. Change infused these women’s lives. For these women, change was initiated by themselves or change came suddenly without warning. Change created opportunities, challenges, and misfortune, which brought sunlight and shadow into their lives. The shadow in their lives was met with patient waiting and, at times, pushing forward graced with quiet optimism and dogged determination to find meaning by experiencing the fullness of life. The test of one’s strength was finding meaning in these experiences and having the capacity to grow with the faith
that opportunities and challenges could be met and suffering could be lived through.

Transcending embodies going above and beyond the ordinary experience and understanding of human experience. Transcending involves finding meaning by rising above and beyond the trials and tribulations of everyday life. Accepting, responding, imagining, and having trust and faith are ways of being connected to an inner spirit and a spiritual force much larger than themselves, a spiritual force that is difficult to understand or explain in concrete terms.

The spiritual connection for these women nourishes a oneness with life, a sense of wholeness, unity, and harmony. The connection provides a sense of the communal with their families and the universe, whereas a spiritual power gives these women strength—a strength that makes them feel whole when they feel separated, that gives them faith when they are doubting, that gives them hope when they feel sadness.

Dwelling with “weness” facilitated a harmonious family existence, thus creating and celebrating a sense of belonging. Living together and sharing invoked mutual pleasure in the time spent together that embraced valuing and accepting humanness in one another. Within family harmony there was room for many voices to be heard, voices of accord in concert with voices of discord. Out of this cadence a harmonious collective voice emerged, a strength for the family.

Sharing family power was a way of experiencing humanness within the family that provided an impetus for family growth and change for mutual benefit.
Among the mothers and children, the essential theme of sharing family power was enacted within a nonhierarchical, process-oriented family structure. The mothers shared power with their children. Family decisions and family problem solving were encountered and managed through negotiation. Within the negotiation process, inclusivity, openness, understanding the issue, respect, and acceptance prevailed. Contacting one another embodied a back-and-forth flow of talking, listening, inspiriting, accepting, and respecting each other's humanness. There was strength in understanding and negotiating family issues in order to act for mutual growth and change within the family system.

Humane connecting is loving, trusting, and an openness in family living; the family itself develops strengths, generating family bonding and optimism for family security and continuity. Humane connecting is an ongoing process. Connections grow, unfold, and expand to include extended family and even animals to complete the family circle. The family becomes more secure as trust and openness are experienced through sharing joys as well as the pain of loss within authentic relationships. Vulnerability to losses deepened family love as family members became connected yet separate in their leaving and letting go. The family continues on in its new constellation with hope for a brighter future.

Symbolically, the river represents family strength to me. I captured the deeper meaning of the phenomenon by writing the following poem:
In springtime
the river
awakens
to new life.
Waters churn
breaking the ice floes
to openness.

The river flows deeply into its soul.
Water flows beneath the water
reflecting itself upon itself,
mirroring its own soul.
Running its own course
with wisdom.

Touching the universe.
Expanding
the boundaries of love.
Transcending
a power greater than ourselves.
Nourishing the earth
to feed her loved ones.

Offering strength
To connect
To grow
To heal
To become whole
To fly
Soaring in the spirit of togetherness.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings

The themes that evolved from the analysis of the data were introspecting, emoting, knowing, finding freedom, gaining resilience, transcending, cocreating family harmony, sharing family power, and humane connecting. Writing about the themes in a linear fashion for purposes of data presentation does them an injustice, because the themes are not linear, hierarchical, or mutually exclusive. The themes are circular; they come round and round again, appear and reappear. They are heard, and they are silent. Throughout the discussion, this circularity is respected in order to present the gestalt of strength for single-parent families.

In the pursuit of being and becoming, the women in this study connected to their authentic selves by acknowledging their inner life. Examining their inner lives involved looking inward and centering within quiet solitude, inviting feelings to enter their beings, trusting the known and the unknown, protecting their freedom, gaining resilience, and transcending trials and tribulations of life. The importance of the inner life has been discussed by feminist, humanist, and existential scholars; nurse scholars also have addressed the inner life (Dobbie, 1991; Rose, 1990).
According to Storr (1988), a humanist, the capacity to be alone is a part of emotional maturity, a part of being and becoming. He believed that people have placed too much emphasis on intimate relationships to the detriment of solitude in human life. Instead, it is desirable to find a balance between interpersonal relationships and solitude. Within solitude, one can find a capacity for inner happiness and inner wholeness. Succinctly stated, being alone is associated with "self-discovery and self-realization; with becoming aware of one's deepest feelings and impulses" (p. 21).

In much the same way, Lindbergh's (1975) notable book of wisdom, Gift from the Sea, revealed that a woman must find a contemplative corner of her own to remain strong. Multiplicity is inherent in all women's lives that leads to fragmentation, not wholeness. The solution is to find balance between "solitude and communion, between retreat and return" (p. 30). In periods of solitude, one can find a true center.

From a feminist and nursing perspective, findings from Rose's (1990) study on the psychological health of women and Dobbie's (1991) study on women's midlife experiences corroborate the findings from this study regarding the woman's inner life. Introspecting was an important process for women to realize their inner strength. In this study, during introspection, the participants found meaning by gaining awareness of themselves by looking inward and centering in order to accept their personal growth and limitations. Rose defined the process of centering as "focusing and balancing between the outside events and the inner self" (p. 63).
Introspecting, on the other hand, involves “the participants gaining awareness of themselves and their own psychological processes. It concerns itself with being curious and wanting to risk and grow psychologically regardless of fear” (p. 64). Dobbie defined the inner life somewhat differently, as inferiority, “a turning inward, a time for self-absorption and inner reflection . . . letting go, reviewing and reassessing one’s experience, and asking questions about one’s life” (p. 828). According to Jevne and Levitan (1989), “stillpoints” are a way of connecting to one’s inner strength. The authors defined a stillpoint as “a technique that allows you to stay calm and feel safe in the midst of threat. . . . They allow you to get on with it without blocking feelings” (p. 175). A stillpoint “strengthens the spirit to deal with that which may be beyond one’s control” (p. 175), which cultivates “a sense of trust in one’s self and a sense of being connected with a source of power greater than what we are alone” (pp. 175-176). The concept of stillpoints is aligned closely with the theme of transcending. In this study, transcending involved connection to an inner spirit and a spiritual force that was much larger than self. The processes of accepting, imagining, trusting, and having faith connected these women to a spiritual force. The connection with a spiritual force nourished a oneness with life, a sense of wholeness, unity, and harmony with life, a strength for women.

James and James (1991), psychotherapists and researchers, gave full credence to the spiritual side of nature. They described a spiritual search as a passionate “reach for goals that have personal meaning and enhance life” (p. 9).
They added that a spiritual search can begin with a personal crisis or a positive experience. The challenge of the spiritual search is to find a path with a heart. A path with a heart involves expanding one’s horizons, moving beyond self-centered activities, acting with love and compassion, and developing one’s full potential. They further stated that the “human spirit expresses the energies that come from the spiritual self . . . which is the deepest self; it is the innermost core of being” (p. 20). In their theory of spiritual development, they described seven basic urges that are expressions of the spiritual self: to live, to be free, to understand, to enjoy, to create, to connect, and to transcend. These basic urges are similar to the strengths expressed by the women and children in this study. The women did not describe themselves as religious persons; rather they believed they were spiritual as they searched for meaning in life, a search that moved them beyond the self, a movement towards a sense of wholeness and unity.

Harris (1989), an educator, presented women’s spirituality as a dance of the spirit that has seven steps: Awakening, discovering, creating, dwelling, nourishing, traditioning, and transforming are steps that lead to a rich inner world of mystery, power, and promise that women enter in order to find their own authentic selves. The depiction of women’s spirituality coalesces with the phenomenon of strength within single-parent families. Harris’s viewpoint was that women are nourished spiritually if they are contemplative and pay attention to their own needs, and they create themselves in ways that are authentic for their being and becoming rather than being what others expect them to be. She further
asserted that women who connect with their deeper selves can move on and engage with others and treat them with reverence and sensitivity. Of particular significance is that the women in this study connected to the deeper parts of themselves and were able to connect with their children, friends, extended family, animals, and the universe in a meaningful way.

Storr (1988) believed that the sense of harmony with the universe, with another person, and within oneself are connected intimately. The experience of oneness or unity can be triggered by external events, and they also can occur in time of solitude. Furthermore,

subtranscendental experiences are closely connected with the creative process; with suddenly being able to make sense out of what had previously appeared impenetrable, or with making a new unity by linking together concepts which had appeared to be quite separate. (p. 188)

The underlying principle of deep oneness with the universe is called the Tao in Eastern philosophy (Capra, 1983). The basic theme of the Tao is the unity and interrelatedness of all things and events in the universe in which there is continuous flow and change. A dominant, recurring theme that permeates the Tao is known as the yin and the yang. The original meaning of yin and yang was “the shady and sunny sides of a mountain” (p. 96). The yin and the yang not only represent the bright and dark side of nature but also represent masculine and feminine: “Yang the strong, male, creative power, was associated with Heaven, whereas yin, the dark, receptive, female and maternal element was represented by the Earth” (p. 96). Within the purview of thought, yang represents rational, logical thinking
compared to the ying that represents intuitive thinking. "Yin is the quiet, contemplative stillness of the sage, yang the strong, creative action of the king" (p. 96). According to Eastern philosophy, within the polarity of opposites (yin and yang), there is a notion of "dynamic balance" in which the "unity of the opposites is experienced" (p. 131). The dynamic balance of the masculine and feminine experienced by the women in this study was reflected in their resilience to overcome adversity and change. Gaining resilience involved patiently waiting and pushing forward to weather life's changes. For these women, patiently waiting was not a time of inactivity, as they were in touch with their thinking and feeling, thus respecting these periods of introspection. The women embraced sunlight and shadow in their lives with quiet receptivity and inward looking and, at times, with deliberate creative action.

Frankl's (1959) theory of existential therapy sheds some light on the resilience of the human spirit. According to his view, the essential theme of existentialism is "to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering" (p. 11). This, in turn, presupposes that in the face of human suffering one can turn life's negative circumstances into something more positive or constructive. Finding meaning in suffering is to choose one's attitude.

Complementarity between Frankl's (1959) existentialist view on the resilience of the human spirit is noted in the nursing literature. Rose (1990), in her study of the inner strength of women, equated resilience with having capacity. Having capacity "revealed the ability to heal, to solve problems, to stay present, to
face pain, and to recognize when one does not have capacity” (p. 66). Resilience of the human spirit also is described by Younger (1991) in her existential theory of mastery. In her theory, she described how individuals emerge healthy and strong from experiences of illness and other stressful health conditions. According to Younger, the concept of mastery is

a human response to difficult or stressful circumstances in which competency, control, and dominion are gained over the experience of stress. [It includes] new capabilities . . ., reorganized self so that there is meaning and purpose in living that transcends the difficulty of living . . . rebuilt shattered assumptions about self and the world and having a greater feeling of harmony and purposefulness. (p. 81)

She further stated that mastery is experienced in the intrapersonal mode but also is expressed in relationships with others. Mastery within relationships is characterized by

stronger family and other interpersonal ties and a greater sense of community with others. . . . These bonds of connectedness with others forge greater social strengths with which to engage both present and future challenges. (p. 81)

The findings in this study reflect the essence of having capacity and mastery. The women were resilient in their approaches to change and loss. Their self-growth was evident as they developed awareness of themselves and the needs of their children. The women perceived themselves as more determined, reliant, and strong. These attitudes led to growth, differentiation, and ability to master situations.

Jung (1971) defined individuation as a “process of differentiation, having as its goal the development of the individual personality” (p. 448). According to
Jung hypothesized a psychic structure that corresponds to the chromosomal makeup of men and women; a predominantly feminine conscious personality in a woman, masculine in a man, together with a predominantly masculine or feminine component, respectively, in the unconscious. He used masculine and feminine not to describe roles or stereotypes but rather to describe archetypal principles: the feminine principle eros, the masculine principle logos. (p. 83)

Eros and logos are both required in a complementary way in an individual’s life. Eros represents “relatedness, the attitude that works for harmony through conciliation and reconciliation. It fosters both interpersonal relationships and integration within oneself” (p. 83). Logos represents “structure, form, discrimination, and the abstract” (p. 83). Furthermore, Mattoon (1981) stated, “For a man or woman to achieve wholeness, it is essential that each develop both the feminine and masculine sides of his or her personality” (p. 84).

Likewise, Duerk (1989) discussed a woman’s journey to herself using a Jungian perspective. According to Duerk, women are feeling more pressure to be successful while simultaneously raising children and developing careers. She warned that in order for women to find their own voice, “We women must listen to ourselves and to each other as the individual voice of each of us is born” (p. 65). Duerk stressed, as well, the importance of a woman being grounded in her feminine elements while staying in proper relationship to the masculine elements within herself.

In this study, the women clearly experienced a movement towards wholeness, a coming together of the feminine and masculine parts of their
personalities. The women's senses of authenticity and depth were experienced by listening and trusting their feelings in a quiet, still place to be who they were, thus finding their true feminine nature. Knowing for these women grew out of knowing self in relation to others. They developed an inner authority that guided their being and becoming. Awareness, receptivity, and responsivity to inner feelings, inner seeing, and inner hearing assisted the women in their own growth and healing and their children's growth. Discovering freedom enabled the women to develop a sense of self by being autonomous, determined, and reliant, thus creating a destiny for themselves and a future for their children. It is concluded that the feminine and masculine parts of one's personality are needed for wholeness.

Duerk (1989) also related this wholeness to the yin and the yang:

> A woman, grounded in the Yin, because of the differing nature of Yin from Yang, is faced with an eternal paradox. The nature of Yin, receptive, is to yield. The nature of Yang is to press forward, to dominate. Yet the two are forever intrinsically equal. And like shadow and light, each needs the other to delineate and complete its existence. (p. 23)

From a psychological and feminist approach, Belenky et al. (1986) described women's different ways of knowing as silence, received knowledge, subjective knowledge, procedural knowledge (separate and connected), and constructed knowledge. For the purpose of this discussion, subjective, connected, and constructed knowing are examined as they closely approximate the essential themes of introspecting, emoting, knowing, and sharing family power. According to Belenky et al., subjective knowing is "personal, private, and intuited. Truth resides within the person, not with an external authority" (p. 54). Women's
reliance on their intuitive processes assisted them with self-protection, self-assertion, and self-definition. The themes of introspecting and emoting describe the processes of defining their true selves, and the theme of knowing included inner hearing, inner seeing, and inner feeling. This inner authority is invisible and ineffable at times, but trusting the inner authority assisted the women in this study to be and become.

Constructed knowing or what is called the “voice of integration” (p. 133) is described by Belenky et al. (1986) as reclaiming oneself, integrating intuition with experience, and weaving together emotional and rational thought. The researchers described the women as articulate and reflective, aware of their own thoughts and feelings. They cared about others in their lives, and they wanted their voices to be heard to make a difference in their lives as well as in the lives of others. In this study, the above description of constructed knowing corroborated with the single-parent women’s way of knowing and the strength it took to find freedom, gain resilience, and transcend difficulties in their busy, complicated lives.

Belenky et al. (1986) described connected knowing as arising out of relationships, which involved intimacy and equality between individuals, feelings, and thought; its goal is understanding, not proof. Conversations in the connected style begin with an attitude of trust. There is the assumption that the other person has something relevant to say, and one is helped to think through situations. The purpose of the conversation is not to judge but to understand. In this study, the families embraced connected knowing when they shared family power. The
families provided a context for knowing through their ongoing dialogue, as mothers were able to hear their own voices; consequently, they were able to draw out the voices of their children. Family decision making and problem solving involved conversations that were intimate, informal, and not bound by rules. Contacting one another embodied a back-and-forth flow of talking, listening, inspiring, accepting, and respecting each other's humanness.

Heidegger (1962) emphasized that “being-in-the-world” means “existing in the world.” In order to understand people, it is necessary to comprehend the situations in which they live. Being-in-the-world with others also was emphasized by Heidegger. He believed that the experiences people have occur within the context of interpersonal relationships. From a psychological, feminist, and family systems perspectives, Becker (1992), Brighton-Cleghorn (1987), Gilligan (1982), Miller (1976), and Rose (1990) espoused the importance of relationships in women's lives.

Miller's (1976) view is that “women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships” (p. 83). In Miller's estimation, development of others, cooperation, and creativity are strengths for women even though these qualities are not valued in a dominator\-subordinate system. In a dominator system, self-enhancement takes precedence over being in relationships with others. Despite the competitive aspects of society, Miller suggested that cooperative behavior is essential for women in order to enhance the development of other human beings while advancing their
own self-development. In doing so, women have created “a new concept of personhood” (p. 44) in which women believe that “caring for people and participating in others’ development is enhancing to self-esteem” (pp. 44-45). At the same time, caring for and knowing oneself is being able to value, embrace, and cultivate one’s emotions and to admit to feelings of vulnerability, all positive strengths for women. The findings from this study reveal that single-parent women were in touch with their inner lives through introspection, and they were able to discover the deeper parts of themselves by being receptive and responsive to their own emotional needs. As a result, they were able to be responsive to the emotional needs of their children. The children, in turn, viewed their mothers as meeting their emotional needs as they described open and trusting relationships within their families. The web of relationships was a source of love, security, and continuity, which constellated a movement towards wholeness.

Gilligan (1982), like Miller (1976), indicated that women are relational selves. She stated, “The elusive mystery of women’s development lies in its recognition of the continuing importance of attachment in the human life cycle” (p. 23). When discussing moral development, Gilligan believed that women are more likely to have a care or response orientation to morality; that is, women perceive themselves as connected and interdependent with others and concerned for the well-being of self and others. She defined caring as “an activity of relationship, of seeing and responding to need, taking care of the world by sustaining the web of connection so that no one is left alone” (p. 62). Women’s experiences of
relationships as a web is contrasted sharply to the hierarchal pyramid, the masculine image of relationships. The image of hierarchy suggests that the person on top is alone, autonomous, and in control of the decisions. The relationships cast in the hierarchal mode “appear inherently unstable and morally problematic” (p. 62). However, relationships in the hierarchal mode can change into a web of relationships when a person is viewed in the center of interconnections; thus, relationships become more equal. Gilligan made particular reference to the parent/child relationship that gives rise to the ethics of justice and care, “the ideals of human relationship—the vision that self and other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt” (p. 63).

Gilligan’s (1982) theory of human relationships supports the essential themes of humane connecting and sharing family power. Humane connecting involved growing, unfolding, and expanding the single-parent families’ relationships to include extended family and even animals to complete the family circle. Mothers appeared to be at the center of the family circle as they listened to and sought input from their children regarding family decisions and family problem solving.

Parallel thinking with Miller (1976) and Gilligan (1982) is noted as Brighton-Cleghorn (1987) explicated the experience of self within a family system. However, in her description of self-experience within the family, she did not
differentiate between male and female experiences. She suggested that human beings

seek a whole sense of themselves as bounded entities, unique, distinct, and significant, capable of initiatives and independent achievements. On the other hand, they need to experience themselves throughout life as part of a network of familiar sustaining and nurturing others. . . . (p. 187)

Healthy self-development processes are idealizing, which implies that “the child can look up to and reliably merge with the admired strengths of the caretaker” (p. 190); mirroring, which entails “reflecting, confirming, admiring” (p. 193) of the self or the child; and alter/ego twinship, which entails “sharing skills and talents” (p. 193). Healthy family development processes are attachment/caregiving, which involves “comfort and security” (p. 193); communicating, which involves attending and decentering; and shared problem solving, which involves “sharing of tasks, interests, and activities” (p. 193). Brighton-Cleghorn’s discussion of self-development and family development in some ways approximates the women’s strength of introspecting and the family strengths of humane connecting, sharing family power, and cocreating family harmony.

Rose (1990) described the theme of interrelating that encompasses being “personal, intimate, open and reciprocal” (p. 65). Contactful interrelating involves relating to and being related with, believing in and being believed in, opening to and being open, giving to and receiving from, energizing and being energized, loving others and being loved—that mutually and intimately connect authentic beings to authentic beings. (pp. 65-66)
In this study, authenticity was realized when the women experienced their feelings in an inviting and knowing way, thus being able to contact their own humanness and the human nature of their children. Openness and trust in family living involved sharing joys, as well as the pain of loss, thus deepening family love and connections.

According to Becker (1992), the parent-child relationship is the initial, foundational, and longest relationship that one will have in a lifetime. The first experience of love occurs in the parent-child relationship. With this in mind, Becker suggested that a healthy parent-child relationship embodies interpersonal validation from parents that consists of receptivity, responsivity, attending, respecting, accepting, and loving their children. When parents are in tune with their own emotional needs, they, in turn, can pay attention to their children's emotional needs. Eventually, children can gain an inner sense of self, trust, self-confidence, emotional independence, and self-love. The essential theme of sharing family power depicted interpersonal validation from parents. Parents in this study listened, inspired, accepted, and respected the opinions of their children as they tried to manage family decisions and problems.

Eisler (1987), in her renowned book *The Chalice and the Blade*, gave support to Gilligan's (1982) work on the psychological development of women. Eisler described two fundamentally different ways of relating from prehistorical times through recorded history and into the future. The “dominator model” has been prevalent throughout recorded history and is based on social ranking and
control. It is characterized by rigid male dominance in all areas of life . . . hierarchic and authoritarian family and social structure (where obedience to orders is expected), a high degree of institutionalized social violence, . . . emphasis on technologies of destruction and domination, conquest of nature, and fear and scarcity as the primary motivators for work. (Eisler & Loye, 1990, pp. 113-114)

The key to the future is a new paradigm that Eisler described as the “partnership model,” a model based on linking. In the partnership system, there is equal partnership between women and men in all areas of life, a more democratic and equalitarian family and social structure (where participatory decision making is expected), more peaceful and mutually satisfying personal, community, and global relations based on interconnection . . . emphasis on creative technologies that sustain and enhance life, respect for nature, stimulation of creativity, self-development, group or team responsibility, and concern for the larger community . . . as primary motivators for work. (Eisler & Loye, 1990, pp. 113-114)

Steinem (1992) equated the new emerging paradigm with circularity that is similar to the partnership model. The organizing principle of circularity consists of “nonbinary, unlinear, nonhierarchical” systems (p. 189). French (1985) concurred with Steinem’s concept of circularity as she stated, “The shape of feminism is not a ‘masculine’ line but a ‘feminine’ circle, approaching problems within contexts, in a round given equal legitimacy to a variety of concerns” (p. 486). Steinem added that if one thinks of individuals as circles, the goal becomes completion, not defeating others. If families are seen as nurturing circles, each member’s development is maximized, whereas if work places are seen as circles, the goal is excellence and cooperation that promote mutual support and connectedness. Finally, if one thinks of nature as a circle, reciprocity and
interdependency exist. Furthermore, she believed that feminism is changing the
gamily from a "hierarchical paradigm" to a "microcosm of democracy" (p. 15)
whereby one acquires the deepest sense of self and human potential.

Throughout the years, feminists have been shaping a new view of women's
psychology, and they have commented on the changing nature of families. They
have recognized that women's experiences are important in understanding models
of adult and family development. De Beauvoir (1963) addressed this issue in
describing the "second sex." With the resurgence of feminism in the 1960s, other
feminists have come forward to describe women's experiences (Chodorow, 1978;
Eisler, 1987; Firestone, 1970; French, 1985; Friedan, 1963; Gilligan, 1982;
Janeway, 1974; Miller, 1976; Millett, 1969; Rose, 1990; Steinem, 1992). On the
heels of the above women came feminist scholars who questioned the role of
women in families and in the context of family therapy (Carter & McGoldrick,
1989; Flax, 1982; Hare-Mustin, 1978; Herz Brown, 1989; Luepnitz, 1988;
Thorne, 1982).

Of the aforementioned scholars, Herz Brown (1989), a nurse, makes
particular reference to the postdivorce family. It is her contention that postdivorce
families should not be defined as a "family in transition to another two-parent
binuclear household, but as a family in transition to a different structure or
organization, a bona fide family form" (p. 371). In her estimation, the goal of
therapy is to empower women so that they can create a family life in order to deal
with the disruption of divorce. She further stated that strong families resolve
family issues in three phases: (a) the aftermath of divorce, (b) the realignment of family relationships in which the single parent has to learn how to manage her children by herself, and (c) during stabilization in which there is a period of calm and acceptance, and attention is turned to ordinary development tasks of the family life cycle.

The single-parent families in this study established a bona fide family form, as family members emphasized a participatory rather than a hierarchial structure of family interaction, thus being more in line with the notions of partnership and circularity as opposed to the dominator model. The power within the family was divided in an equalitarian way without defusing the power of the mother. With the assistance of their mothers, children participated in decision-making and problem-solving issues that related to their own growth and development. Family conflict was not submerged but dealt with directly. Voices of discord, as well as voices of accord, were heard. Out of this cadence, a harmonious collective voice emerged that was a strength for the family.

Noddings' (1984) view of caring is pertinent in order to gain further understanding of strength in single-parent families. Noddings’ argument for ethics based on caring is rooted in the feminine that embodies receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness. According to Noddings, the essential ingredients in a caring relationship are “engrossment and motivational displacement on the part of one-caring and a form of responsiveness or reciprocity on the part of the cared-for” (p. 150). She explained one-caring as engrossment with another and then as a
motivational shift toward the other. Engrossment involves reception rather than projection: "I receive the other into myself, and I see and feel with the other" (p. 30). The one-caring includes experience of the world of the cared-for without prejudgment or evaluation. How one cares grows out of the "constellation of conditions that is viewed through both the eyes of the one-caring and the eyes of the cared-for" (p. 13). A caring relationship not only involves the one-caring but also the response of the cared-for. Noddings stated,

The cared-for contributes to the caring relation . . . by receiving the efforts of the one-caring, and this receiving may be accomplished by a disclosure of his own subjective experience in direct response to the one-caring or by a happy and vigorous pursuit of his own projects. (pp. 150-151)

In this study, the essential themes of cocreating family harmony, sharing family power, and humane connecting closely exemplify the caring relation as described by Noddings (1984). These families were able to create a sense of belonging by mutually enjoying time spent together within a framework that valued and accepted the humanness in one another. Family issues were dealt with when the mothers considered the children's points of view within a conversational dialogue that embodied a back-and-forth flow of talking, listening, inspiring, accepting, and respecting each other's humanness. Humane connecting occurred in a web of relationships that involved an openness and trust between mothers and their children, thus generating family bonding and an optimism for family security and continuity. Mothers were able to receive their children on a human level and respond to their emotional needs; thus, children were able to feel secure with an
optimism for the future of the family. Connections grew within the family and expanded to include other relationships and even pets to complete the family circle.

Noddings (1984) suggested that one's ethics of caring can be expanded and enriched when one nurtures pets. She stated, "When we take a creature into our home, name it, feed it, lay affectionate hands upon it, we establish a relation that induces expectations" (p. 157). Furthermore, she suggested that the ethical ideal of a child can be nurtured when he or she has the opportunity to care for pets in cooperation with a caring adult.

Other researchers have suggested that pets can improve the quality of life of individuals and families. The benefits of having companion animals are numerous: Pets can decrease feelings of meaningless and isolation; they can provide constancy and feelings of stability through difficult times; and they can make one feel valued and needed (Carmack, 1991). Pets are often valued members of a family, and they can provide companionship, safety, a daily routine and comfort for the owner, and experiences of growth, separation, and loss for children (Rosenkoetter, 1991). Pets also can reflect family emotions and can be brought into the family emotional system to act as a peacemaker and to provide a diversion from a crisis or tension within the family (Cain, 1991). In this study, pets were vital members of the family as they provided comfort, security, companionship, and a means for the children to experience caring, growth, loss, and separation.

The underlying dimensions of cohesion and adaptability described in the circumflex family model closely relate to the family themes of cocreating family
harmony, humane connecting, and sharing family power. Olson et al. (1983) described family adaptability as the "ability of a marital or family system to change its power structure, role relationships, and relationship rules in response to situational or developmental stress" (p. 48). In particular, sharing family power closely relates to the dimension of adaptability. Among the mothers and children, the essential theme of sharing family power was enacted within a nonhierarchical, process-oriented structure. The mothers shared power with their children as family decisions were managed through negotiation. There was strength in understanding and negotiating family issues in order to act for mutual change and growth within the family system. On the other hand, cohesion is described as "the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another" (Olson et al., 1983, p. 48) and the degree of individual autonomy an individual experiences in the family system. Cocreating family harmony and humane connecting relate somewhat to the dimension of cohesion. In this study, a harmonious family existence was created and celebrated through a sense of belonging. Within family harmony, there is room to express accord, as well as discord, which is a strength for the family. Humane connecting invokes a connectedness and a separateness that generates loving, trusting, and an openness in family living. Connections grow, unfold, and expand to include extended family and even animals to complete the family circle. The family becomes more secure as trust and openness are experienced through sharing joys as well as the pain of loss within authentic relationships. Vulnerability to losses deepen family love as family members
become connected yet separate in their leaving and letting go.

Parse's (1981) central concept of health is somewhat congruent with the essence of strength of single-parent families. Parse described health as "the emergent process of man with others unfolding toward greater complexity" (p. 33). She added that health is "a personal commitment. . . . Health is one's unfolding in interconnectedness with the world" (Parse, 1990b, p. 137). She further elaborated that the human is a creative author.

The creative author view reflects a belief that human existence is freely chosen in constitution with the universe, not predetermined. It specifies the human in open encounter with the world. A person is a living being making choices—not an object functioning to complete tasks. Humans live the power to choose a stand toward the universe; to reach beyond what might be. The creative-author human creates a personal world with spirit, compassion, and honor. . . . It is grounded in the belief that one is responsible for personal choices, has dignity, and the capacity to love, fear, be in pain, be angry, and express joy and wonder. (Parse, 1990b, p. 137)

Also consistent with the view of the creative author, as described by Parse (1990b), is Watson (1985), who stated that the "person exists as a living, growing gestalt. The person possesses three spheres of being—mind, body, and soul—that are influenced by the concept of self" (p. 54). Watson gave credence to the spiritual world of individuals by suggesting that persons are embodied in the physical world, but one also can "transcend the physical world and nature by controlling it, subduing it, changing it, or living in harmony with it" (p. 55).

Both Parse (1990b) and Watson (1985) viewed health as a process of becoming. Likewise, the phenomenon of strength in this study was a process of becoming, a growing relationship with self and others. In the pursuit of becoming,
the women in this study connected to their authentic selves by acknowledging their inner lives. Examining their inner lives involved looking inward and centering within quiet solitude, inviting feeling to enter their beings, trusting and being open to the known and the unknown, valuing their freedom to make choices, gaining resilience, and transcending the ordinariness of life. Becoming, as experienced by these women, was an unfolding process of discovery of a sense of self, separate yet connected to others. In their caring connections with their children and others, family strength evolved. Family strength involved relationships that were loving, open, and trusting, which paved the way for family security and continuity. Family harmony constituted shared living together that embodied valuing and accepting humanness in one another. Within family harmony, the ups and downs of everyday life were dealt with. Shared family power was enacted within a nonhierarchical, process-oriented family structure. Family decisions and family problem solving were encountered and managed through negotiation with the mothers and the children. Within the negotiation process, openness, understanding the issue, respect, and acceptance prevailed. There was strength in understanding and negotiating family issues in order to act for mutual growth and change within the family system.

Implications for Nursing Theory, Practice, and Research

Phenomenology, the basis for this research, was a valuable approach of inquiry for discovering meaning and describing the experience of strength from
single-parent mothers' and their children's perspectives. Studying the lived experience of strength from the mothers' and children’s perspective adds depth to the understanding of the phenomenon of strength. This study adds new knowledge to nursing as a human science and, in particular, to the field of family nursing.

In the past, nurses have considered quantitative research as being scientific and the method of choice in preference to less scientifically reputable qualitative methods. Quantitative research uses the scientific method to measure objective knowledge that comes from a positivist-empirical world view (Taylor, 1993). In nursing, there is a movement from strictly viewing the world through a traditional science paradigm to a human science paradigm. Watson (1985) explained that “... the prevailing world view of nursing science is becoming more and more phenomenologically inductive, subjective, process-oriented, and even metaphysical” (p. 21). She added that the essence of human existence is “that the human has transcended nature--yet remains a part of it. The human can go forward through the use of the mind, to higher levels of consciousness, by finding peace and harmony in existence” (p. 45).

Nursing and phenomenology share some common ground in that the phenomena of interest to nursing are related to the subjective experiences of individuals, families, and nurses as human beings and the context in which they live out their lives. Nursing and phenomenology are both concerned with understanding the experiences of everyday life. The description and understanding of experiences that are relevant to nursing practice can be a beginning in
identifying the concepts that will provide the essential structure for theory-building initiatives. For example, this investigation brought forth new information about the strength of women in the context of the single-parent family and the strength relative to that family system. The processes of introspecting, emoting, knowing, gaining resilience, finding freedom, transcending, cocreating family harmony, sharing family power, and humane connecting establish a basis from which new understandings about the single-parent family structure can emerge. The shift away from pathology, mother blaming, and negative labelling of single-parent families towards a health promotion framework helps to empower these families to take control of their own lives and to make a difference in their quality of life.

In this study, women’s and children’s subjective experiences were given priority. Although studying women and children is not entirely new, studying single-parent family strengths as women and children understand themselves and their world is novel. The development of adequate knowledge regarding the healthy functioning of female-headed families must consider a feminist perspective that includes (a) the women’s experience as a legitimate source of knowledge; (b) subjective data as valid; (c) informants as authors of their own lives; (d) knowledge as relational and contextual; and (e) no sharp distinctions between the personal and the political (Campbell & Bunting, 1991). Not only must women’s experiences in the family be considered but the experiences of children within the single-parent family system must be acknowledged.

In the past, women’s and children’s experiences within the family have
been ignored or misrepresented. The ability of mothers and children to name their experience of strength within the single-parent family structure is vital to self-understanding and a positive family identity. Ethical family care can be provided to families when nurses strive to develop relationships with them and try to understand the experience from their perspectives. Bergum (1993) elaborated that knowledge for ethical decision making must evolve through three ways of knowing: (a) subjective, (b) objective, and (c) participatory. Listening to the family’s experience and deliberate objective abstraction are important sources of knowledge for nursing care. However, comprehensive knowledge results when nurses also strive to understand the meaning the experience has for the individual or family. In this way, nurses can find unique ways to care for individual families that focus on their particular understanding of human experience.

Further, Rolfe (1993) suggested that the location of nursing within the traditional scientific paradigm in which formal theory informs and determines practice should be reevaluated. He proposed that informal theory should be generated from practical situations by “reflection-in-action, and practice is modified by the reflexive application of that theory back into practice” (p. 176). He argued that there is a gap between theory and practice and that this is due to formal theory inability to account for what really happens in clinical situations. Less time should be spent on the application of formal theories and models to practice, and more time should be spent on reflecting about individual situations within practice.
Doing phenomenology promotes reflection on individual situations within the context of nursing, and it has profound implications for family nursing practice, theory, and research. The family provides a rich interpersonal environment from which shared meanings can be derived. Using the phenomenological method assists family nurses and public health nurses to move away from the expert model of care to assisting families in determining their own meaning. In other words, it is assumed that families are authors of their thoughts and feelings, and they are the experts on health within their family system. Thus, thoughtful, sensitive care could be provided to families that better reflects their own reality. In turn, there would be less reliance on formal theory-driving practice, less diagnosing and intervening on the part of the nurse, and less emphasis on problem-based practice.

The concept of family health, a goal for nursing practice, is not well understood or defined (Anderson & Tomlinson, 1992). The findings from this study refuted the pathological view of single-parent families and provided a description of strength that contributes to healthy functioning of mother-led, single-parent families. It is important for family and public health nurses to recognize the strength and the abilities of single-parent families to act as a whole and intact unit. Appreciating the strength of single-parent families will empower women to take control of their own lives.

Holistic nursing care of individuals and families considers the mind, body, and spiritual dimensions. Phenomenologic inquiry lends itself to exploring
subjective and spiritual meaning from the individual’s perspective. In this study, the women described themselves as spiritual. The essence of humane connecting and transcending embodied a feeling of connection to self, to others, and to a larger meaning—something beyond themselves. In order for nurses to provide spiritual care, they first must acknowledge the value of spirituality in one’s life, be fully present with others, and assess for spiritual health in the day-to-day care of their clients and families.

Recommendations for Further Study

The central focus of this dissertation was the experience of strength within single-parent families from the perspective of mothers and children. Conversations with mothers and children have opened up ways to explore what it means to experience strength within a single-parent family. The findings provoke more questions than answers; consequently, there is a need for conversations to continue to understand fully the lives of women and children in a single-parent family. Van Manen (1990) explained that the human science perspective assumes that “the lived human experience is always more complex than the result of any one singular description” (p. 16).

The findings from this study yielded nine essential themes: introspecting, emoting, knowing, finding freedom, gaining resilience, co-creating family harmony, sharing family power, and humane connecting. Each one of these themes, in and of itself, warrants further investigation and analysis.

In order to maximize the likelihood of discovering the essence of the
phenomenon of strength across groups, it is important to interview several samples of mother-led single-parent families from a variety of backgrounds, age ranges, different family configurations, and cultural backgrounds. Is strength different for women who voluntarily choose the single-parent family structure?

Longitudinal studies could track strength over time as families enter into new developmental stages. The question becomes: Do families with adolescents have different strengths compared to families with infants, preschool children, and school-age children?

In this study, conversational interviews were conducted separately with mothers and their children. In order to have another window on the relationships within the family, it would be appropriate to conduct individual interviews along with family interviews. Participant observation in conjunction with conversational interviews, particularly with children, would enhance data collection.

The father-led, single-parent family is becoming more acceptable and prevalent. It would be relevant to study this family configuration to ascertain whether the strengths are similar or different from those of mother-led, single-parent families. Some important questions are the following: Do single-parent fathers incorporate the more feminine parts of their being into their lived experience? How do they nurture their children? What resources do they need to meet successfully the needs of the family? What strengths do the children perceive in this family structure?
Epilogue

As I near completion of this dissertation, there is a feeling of closure, an ending that does not end. One chapter in my life is finished, yet it provides an opening to another chapter—a chapter that includes a hope for a better life for all women and children, a better life for all humanity. Morrow (1991) eloquently described my dream:

Women as a gender stand on the brink of developing their capabilities for mastery, of discovering the passion for fulfillment in work and cultural potency. Men as a gender also stand to benefit greatly from this gender revolution. Men will become aware of the joyous production possible in reproduction as they participate more fully in the dialectics of accomplicity. . . . Men and women will then be able to participate more intelligently in the formation of societies at once more creative and just. (p. 242)
APPENDIX A

STUDY INVITATION
Single-Parent Family Study

I am a nurse researcher interested in learning more about the strength of single-parent families. If you are a female single parent, have children between 8 to 15 years old living in the home, and have been separated or divorced for 2 or more years, please call Beverly Anderson, RN, PhD C, at 270-0155 if you are interested in participating in this study or would like more information.
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE
1. Length of time since separation/divorce
2. Names of children and ages
3. Mother's educational level
4. Age of mother
5. Mother's occupation
   Hours per week (if mother works outside the home)
   Child care arrangements while employed
6. Average income for the past 2 years
   Less than $20,000
   $20,000 to $29,999
   $30,000 to $39,999
   $40,000 to $49,999
   $50,000 to $59,999
   More than $60,000
7. Describe father's involvement with the children
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
You and your school-aged children, 8 to 15 years of age, are invited to take part in a study about your experience of strength within your single-parent family. The information gained from this study may assist nurses in helping other single-parent families improve their lives.

Your family's participation will be as follows:

**Mother's participation:** You will be interviewed and asked to recall specific thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as situations, events, places, and people that have helped you to gain strength as a single parent and, in general, strengthened your single-parent family. The interview will be tape-recorded. You also may wish to share personal journals, artwork, photographs, or poems with me that depict your experiences of family strength. You will be asked to respond to a short questionnaire that asks about your age, educational level, occupation, children's names and ages, income, child care arrangements, length of time since separation/divorce, and father's involvement with the children.

The tape-recorded interviews, which will last approximately 1 to 2 hours, will take place in a mutually agreed upon location. After the initial conversation, a follow-up telephone call or meeting will be arranged to discuss whether the researcher's findings accurately reflect the experience of your family. This will take approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour of your time.

**Children's participation:** Your school-aged children will be asked to draw a picture of your family and discuss their views of family strength in a tape-recorded conversation lasting approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour. Each child will be interviewed separately without the mother or other children present.
If you participate, the only risks to you will be that some of your time will be used for the interviews; and you may share some personal information. There will be no payment for your participation in this study. The researcher has the right to end your participation in this study if the need arises.

Any information collected in this study will not be associated with your name or your children’s names. Your family will remain anonymous as tapes, questionnaires, artwork, poems, journals, and typed transcripts will be identified by a code name or number. The codes will be destroyed upon completion of this study. Audiotapes will be erased, and the questionnaires will be destroyed following completion of the final report. Poems, artwork, photographs, and journals will be returned to the participants. Direct quotes from conversations and journals and artwork will be used in publications, papers, and presentations at conferences; however, you will not be personally identified. Confidentiality of information is guaranteed as much as possible. A final copy of the report will be made available to your family if you so desire.

If there are any questions relating to this study, you may call the nurse researcher, Beverly Anderson, anytime at 270-0155. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject or if problems arise that you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at (801)-581-3655.

Consent: ______________________

Participant (please print name): ______________________

I have read this form, and the nurse researcher has explained the contents of this form to me. I agree to participate and also agree to have my school-aged children participate in this study. I understand that my children and I are free to refuse to answer any of the questions and that I can end our participation in this study at any time. This form is being signed in duplicate, and I am keeping a copy for my information.

Signed: ______________________ Date: ______

Witness: ______________________ Date: ______
You are invited to take part in a study in which we will discuss the good things that happen in your single-parent family. What you say is very important to nurses as your information may help other single-parent families live a better life.

If you participate in this study, I will ask you to do a drawing of your family and talk with me about the things that you like about your family. We will talk together for approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour in a place that we both agree upon. During our conversation, I would like to use a tape recorder so that I do not miss anything that you say to me. You may refuse to answer any questions; if, during our conversation, you decide you do not want to talk anymore, that is okay.

There is no harm that will come to you for participating in this study. You will not receive any money for your help in this study. The researcher has the right to end your participation in this study if the need arises.

You will not be identified personally in this study. Your artwork and the audiotape will be identified with a code name or number; these codes will be destroyed at the end of the study. Audiotape will be erased following the final completion of the report. A copy of the final report of the study will be shared with you if you wish.

If you have any questions about this study, you may call the nurse researcher, Beverly Anderson, anytime at 270-0155. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject or if problems arise that you cannot discuss with the investigator, please contact the Institutional Review Board Office at (801)581-3655.

Assent: ___________________

Participant (please print name): ___________________
I have read this form, and the nurse researcher has explained the form to me. I agree to participate in this study. I understand that I may refuse to answer any questions and that I can end my participation at any time. I must sign two copies of this form so that I can keep one copy for myself.

Signed: __________________________  Date: __________

Witness: __________________________  Date: __________
APPENDIX E

EXAMPLE OF SUBSTANTIVE DATA AND
FORMULATED MEANINGS
Introspecting

**Significant Statements**
1. I think for myself; I have strength in that it hasn’t always been this way, but it’s been a process. It’s almost 6 years now that we’ve been on our own and I would be hard-pressed to say that we had strength as a family or strength as an individual because every thing was so new. And it was a real transition force, because Melody’s father had been at home and looked after her.

2. And when I was first on my own, I had a lot of feelings. I felt very guilty, sad, and afraid and many of the feelings that people do feel when they’re on their own. It was very therapeutic for me to write it. But it was also very therapeutic to go back and read and see that a year ago these were some of the issues that I was struggling with and now they’re not. You know and I’ve moved beyond them and I guess I could see growth in myself—of how overwhelmed I felt at first with being a parent.

3. And it got very apparent to me that something was wrong and I needed some place to talk about those feelings and to express it. And I find when I write, I don’t think; I just let

**Formulated Meanings**
1. Strength occurred over time as this woman discovered that she could parent on her own. (M1)

2. This woman moved beyond the uncomfortable feelings of the past to a new sense of self. (M1)

3. The capacity to be alone assisted this woman with awareness of her deepest feelings. (M1)
myself feel it and write it so that I try not to let my defenses get in the way; and even when I talk with another person, I always was concerned what they would think or say. So this was something that was very safe, and the only rule that I had was that I had to be very truthful.

4. But after that when I was on my own, I wrote almost every day, and it got to be like a long-term relationship. It was a period of time that I could just let my feelings be there and nobody could criticize it or judge it nor would I have to pretend.

5. I think now especially what I do, particularly in the last 4 or 5 years, I do a lot of positive thoughts to myself. I do a lot of, you know, I can, I can, I am, I will . . . and everyone in the household is expected to do certain jobs because mommy is not a slave around here.

4. This woman found the need to protect her inner self from outside interference in order to find her true self. (M1)

5. This woman found meaning in self-affirmation. (M2)
6. I think that I know my own limitations. And when I feel my nerves are getting frazzled, I need to take a break; lots of times it’s the bathroom that’s my screaming closet. I’ll lock myself in the bathroom and take a book, read it, or in my room, because it’s got a locked door as well. And I’ll take 5 or 10 or 15 minutes, however long I need to take so that I don’t lose it. If I don’t lose it, they don’t lose it usually.

7. I’m really an extrovert, so I tend to get my energy from dealing with people and I get a lot of support and strength just from talking to other people. But at night, when the kids are fooling around or something like that, that will tend to be when I need space by myself.

8. The only thing that is different is that my brother and sisters talked about how we felt rejected in the family and that he was never there for us, feelings like that. And you know how that has affected us as we have grown up, ’cause I’ve read all those adult children of alcoholic books; and my sister was starting to read some of them. And my other sister has gone another route, and she’s become a born-again Christian.

6. This woman knew her own limitations and her need for time away from her children to gain composure. (M2)

7. Even though this woman is an extrovert, she needs some solitude to return to the self. (M2)

8. This woman attempted to uncover the past to find her real self by being more open about her feelings with her sisters. (M3)
9. You work with clay. First we made a mask. Right now I’m making this thing; it kind of looks like the shape of a fish but more like a tadpole; there’s not details, it’s more of a form; there is little fins down there, and it is called the beginning anyway.

10. It’s relaxing; it’s a release; and it’s on my own; I’m an introvert, and I don’t know if that makes a difference. It probably does. I get my strength from being on my own. I can regroup and then I can go out again. That can be part of it; I need time to pull within and then I’m ready to go back out again.

11. I needed counselling to walk away from that relationship. I needed permission that I could do that ‘cause it was a lot of guilt. It was an abusive relationship. And so he would come back. I love you. And then I’d go and always give into it, and so I needed counseling and someone to say that yes, you can do this and you are not doing a bad thing.

9. This woman found meaning by concentrating her creative energy on herself thus creating a new beginning. (M3)

10. This woman found strength by going inward by revealing herself to herself. (M3)

11. This woman drew strength from counselling sessions in order to affirm herself. (M3)
12. Our relationship was very conflictual. It was like I had another kid. Things that I remember is me trying to get the kids off so I could go to school and the kids to day-care. And they would say, well mommy, how come I have to go, daddy’s in bed? ’Cause he’d be out all night. So it was very stressful, and to end the relationship was a relief. And I was more unhappy then, and now I’m much more even keeled than I used to be back then.

13. The way I look at it is I’ve taken a death camp experience and turned it around to make me go ahead instead of behind. But there is a drawback to that because I’ve spent the last 4 years in therapy trying to deal with all these little things from my past that still today reflect my life. When I married my ex, it was for a father figure which I didn’t have. I wasn’t raised with a father, and he just happened to fit the bill at the time. Of course, at the time I would never have admitted to that, but now looking back over it, I can. And it lasted for 5½ years and then enough was enough.

12. This woman realized that being responsible for everything moved her from her center. (M3)

13. This woman has found meaning in her ability to change her life despite her suffering. (M4)
14. When I was married I was a mouse. Now that I'm not, people can't shut me up. When I was younger, I was raised that you're to be seen and not heard. And I lived that role until I got separated, and I started to get angry back at the world at everybody. And I said okay, enough is enough. And now I don't hesitate to say exactly what is on my mind, and I really don't care who is standing around. A lot of my friends that know me know that; and they know that if I don't like it, I'm going to come right out and say something.

15. I question what is my whole purpose in life. Why am I here? And then I think I did what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to multiply so I did, three times, you know. Now what do I do?

14. This woman has found the voice within herself to gain feelings of inner vitality and the power to act on her own behalf. (M4)

15. Questioning her very existence has led this woman to believe that she has met some of her life's goals; but she continues to contemplate her future. (M4)
APPENDIX F

FAMILY DRAWING BY MELODY
My family

me

mom

big girl

floor
APPENDIX G

FAMILY DRAWINGS BY BOB AND NANCY
Pepl and Jack
My Mom
and Skin Hane
Floyd My Sesth
she by gun sales
Pet's Red
My Family

I LOVE MY FAMILY!

Mommy

Fluff

My Fish Tank

Skinner and Honey the hamsters
APPENDIX H

FAMILY DRAWINGS BY ELIZABETH AND SHANE
APPENDIX I

FAMILY DRAWINGS BY ANGELA, LORI, AND BEKKI
REFERENCES


