

**Latin American Women's Perceptions of Divorce: An Exploratory Study  
of the Situation and Image of Divorced Women in Puerto Rico and the  
Dominican Republic**

Nancy P. López

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History: Latin American Area Studies

Committee Members

Dr. Joyce Arditti, Chair  
Dr. Jacqueline Bixler  
Dr. Jessica Folkart

February 10, 2004  
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Divorce, Women, Image, Latin America, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico,  
On-Line Survey

Copyright 2004, Nancy P. López

# Latin American Women's Perceptions of Divorce: An Exploratory Study of the Situation and Image of Divorced Women in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic

Nancy P. López

(ABSTRACT)

The identity of Latin America is composed of elements inherited from Europe, Asia and Africa. This identity has been defined with a series of images, roles, behaviors and rules created to maintain a particular unification among the citizens of these societies. Cultural ideologies involving marriage, separation and divorce have been subjected to historical changes. Divorce in Latin America typically has had a negative connotation and communities have considered divorced women as outcasts. The purpose of this study is to examine Puerto Rican and Dominican women's perception of divorce with particular emphasis on divorced women's image and experience in these countries. There are similarities and differences between the two countries based on geographical, cultural, historical, economic and legal issues. Due to the cultural presence of the United States in Puerto Rico, many issues now separate the two countries. I consider this "duality" (Traditional/Latin American and Westernized/American) to be an interesting context for exploration particularly as it relates to women's perception of divorce.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people were involved in the success and completion of this work. To all of them, I render my sincere appreciation and gratitude. To my parents, Rafael and Dinorah, for believing in me; to my children, Eduardo and Laura Patricia, for your patience, understanding, and sacrifices; to all participants on the survey, for your willingness to cooperate and sincere answers and opinions; to the Foreign Language and History departments, for giving me the opportunity and support to complete this program; to my thesis committee, for keeping me on track, motivated, and for all your effort to make this work successful. To all my friends and family, thanks for your words of encouragement and being there in the “good times” and the “bad times.”

To all, my sincere and endless gratitude.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ABSTRACT .....</b>	<b>II</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>III</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>PERSONAL STATEMENT .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>GUIDING DEFINITIONS OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>THEORETICAL TRADITIONS INFORMING THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>METHOD.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Research Design And Data Collection.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Sample and Procedure .....</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>RESULTS .....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Participant Characteristics.....</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>General Perception of Divorced Women .....</b>	<b>37</b>
Divorced Women as Successes .....	38
Divorced Women as Failures.....	39
Capability to Endure.....	41
<b>Divorced Women’s Self-Image.....</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>Divorced Women’s Image in Society: Cultural Attitudes .....</b>	<b>45</b>
Progressive vs. Traditional Cultural Attitudes .....	46
Persistent Negative Perceptions .....	48
Religious Influences.....	51

<b>The Transmission of Negativity .....</b>	<b>54</b>
<b>Divorced Women as a Special Group.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Voices of Latin American Women and the Meaning of Divorce .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Divorced Women and Stigma.....</b>	<b>64</b>
<b>Culture and the Self: Self-Image of Divorced Women .....</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>Societal Responsiveness to the Needs of Divorced Women .....</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>76</b>
<b>APPENDIX A: QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE CODING .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Coding Schema (Qualitative) .....</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Code Book (Quantitative).....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: SURVEY (ENGLISH TRANSLATION) .....</b>	<b>84</b>

## INTRODUCTION

“¿Yo? ¿Convertirme en una divorciada más? ¡Jamás!”  
Popular saying among Dominican women.

Me? Become another divorced women? Never!

Latin America is a unique area composed of elements inherited from Europe, Asia and Africa. These regions have helped shape the identity of Latin America as well as their language, culture, social, and legal institutions. This identity has been defined with a series of images, roles, behaviors, and rules created to maintain a particular unification among the citizens of these societies. While Latin America can be considered a unified set of countries sharing a similar history, language, culture, and legal traditions, (which they still do in large part) it is important to recognize that every country in Latin America has its own set of developments that differ one from another.

The Spanish language, legal traditions, and culture, including *machista* behavior and the influence of the Catholic Church, are some of the most important cultural issues that Latin American countries share as a result of their common heritage of the colonial period. These issues are the ones that, although they create unity, at the same time reflect diversity, especially relative to the geographical particularities of specific countries. An example can be seen in the modern uses of the Spanish language. Latin American countries more closely involved with the United States have included in their Spanish words and meanings (especially those related to technology) not found in those countries further away. In the specific case of Puerto Rico, due to their close relationship with the United States, at one point the legal status of the Spanish language as the official language of the

country was discussed. All of Latin America shares (due to the pattern of colonization and Spanish heritage) the same basis for cultural ideologies involving marriage, separation, and divorce. However, the current trends regarding those issues have been subjected to historical changes following Independence from Spain. Divorce, for instance, was introduced differently in each Latin American country and has had different evolutions (for example, in Chile divorce is still considered illegal). Even in modern times, divorce in Latin America is still stigmatized which affects the perception and personal experience of members of the society.

For women, divorce can be a life-changing situation, bringing on a host of social, psychological, and economic changes. Some changes, particularly economic, can be difficult for the women experiencing them and can determine social roles and attitudes. It is important to understand that divorce does not occur in a vacuum, but that the experience is embedded in a cultural context that will influence one's understanding of the phenomena. Particularly in Latin America, because of its unique history and cultural developments, divorce tends to be more heavily stigmatized compared to countries in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Divorce in Latin America typically has a negative connotation and communities have considered divorced women as outcasts. In most instances, women have suffered rejection, neglect, and blame for their failure in fulfilling their roles as wives and homemakers (Muñoz Vázquez & Fernández Bauzó, 1998).

Attitudes about women's social location and the importance of marriage are bound to have an impact on how one perceives divorce in general, as well as how one may navigate the experience. For example, there is some evidence to suggest that women in

more traditional cultures have a more difficult adaptation than women in progressive cultures where divorce is considered more normative (Song, 1991).

The purpose of this study is to examine Puerto Rican and Dominican women's perception of divorce with particular emphasis on divorced women's image and experience in these countries. There are similarities and differences between the two countries based on geographical, cultural, historical, economic, and legal issues. Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are both located in the Caribbean region next to one another and both were colonized by Spain. They shared the same language, economic system, legal institutions, social, and religious structures during the colonial period, thus uniting them within the same Latin American culture. Due to subsequent historical events and to the stronger political, economic, and cultural presence of the United States in Puerto Rico, many issues now separate the two countries. For example, most of Puerto Rico's economic and legal systems have been Americanized. These changes in Puerto Rico's culture have contributed to transformation of identity for Puerto Rican people, and have affected their conceptualization of family roles. I consider this "duality" (Traditional/Latin American and Westernized/American) in Puerto Rican identity to be an interesting context for exploration particularly as it relates to women's perception of divorce. Due in part to the influence of the United States, divorce is more normative in Puerto Rico compared to the Dominican Republic. It is possible that women's perceptions of divorce in the Dominican Republic may have remained more traditional, while in Puerto Rico they have evolved in a more progressive manner.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions created a framework for this research and identified the phenomenon I studied (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two basic research questions guided this study:

1. What are women's perceptions of divorce in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico?
2. How do divorced women perceive themselves?

## PERSONAL STATEMENT

My interest in this topic is twofold. The first reason relates to my own personal history and educational background. I was born in the Dominican Republic, where I was raised within a conservative society. I received a Catholic elementary and high school education and graduated from college with a Law degree. Shortly after getting married I moved to the United States, where I lived for 6 years. After that period I separated from my Dominican husband and moved back to the Dominican Republic (where I initiated the divorce process). I stayed there for two years and returned to the United States to earn an M.A. in the History/Area Studies at Virginia Tech. On my return to the Dominican Republic as a separated woman, I encountered many different reactions from family members, relatives, and friends varying from negative to positive attitudes. I was amazed to see how people based their images and conceptualization of divorced women on cultural parameters, particularly paternalistic and *machista* ideas. Among the negative reactions I experienced, many were concerns of family members regarding how society would view

me: a failure, an immoral person, a weak woman, and someone unworthy of respect. On the other hand, among the positive reactions I received support and words of encouragement. All these reactions are direct indications of both cultural traditions and changes in Dominican society and therefore I considered the opposing attitudes interesting grounds for exploration.

I started researching this topic by looking for a definition of divorce commonly accepted and recognized by both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. To my surprise, the definition is the same one used in the United States. I researched the evolution of divorce throughout history, starting with the Romans, paying attention to law and the conceptualization of divorce, and continuing through Christianity, Reformation, and the French Revolution while underscoring the role of the Catholic Church in different periods of time and the continuous influence that this religious institution has had in Latin America. Important sources were the works of Beryl Rawson's (1991) *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Roman Society*, Max Rheinstein's (1980) *Marriage Instability, Divorce and the Law*, and Roderick Phillips's (1998) *Putting Asunder*. I then explored the influences of *machismo* and *hembrismo* behaviors in Latin American societies to better understand how these behaviors help shape image and create common stereotypes. Primary sources include Stanley and Barbara Stain's (1970) *Colonial Heritage of Latin America*, Ann Pescatello's (1973) *Female and Male in Latin America*, and Christine Bose and Edna Acosta-Belen's (1995) *Women in the Latin American Development Process*. Then, I proceeded to gather information regarding divorce and women in Latin America and the United States (because of its influence on Puerto Rico), paying special attention to the situation of women after divorce. I found information on the consequences of divorce on women, children, and

society but mainly referring to psychological, legal, or economical issues. I consulted many sources in English and Spanish, including books, articles, newspapers and Internet pages from the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic. Universities in Puerto Rico (because they follow the model of United States universities) have demonstrated an interest in the topic of divorced women and their contribution to society, as well as the causes and consequences of divorce. However, information on the image and behaviors of divorced women within a cultural context is scarce in Puerto Rico and virtually non-existent in the Dominican Republic. This lack of information is what prompted me to create an on-line survey to explore these issues and to create a documented source on the cultural topics that I wanted to investigate. The survey was written in Spanish<sup>1</sup> and contained twenty-two questions, which were answered by 95 women mainly from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic (with a few responses from women from several other countries in Latin America). The women responded with a variety of opinions based on personal or semi-personal experiences, in their own voices. This was a small survey and because of its Internet format was only available to a small group of women with Internet access, and therefore it cannot be considered as a representation of the opinions of all women in both countries. The main goal of this survey was to create a general overview of divorced women's image in society based only on women's opinions.

---

<sup>1</sup> All translations in this thesis and about the results of survey are mine, unless otherwise noted.

## GUIDING DEFINITIONS OF TERMS AND CONCEPTS

**Perception:** The term *perception* has been defined as “the ability to perceive or understand an idea or situation” (Cayne & Lechner, 1992, p. 745). In the context of this study this term is used to refer to the overall idea or knowledge a person has about the situation of divorce, and participants in the survey were asked to state their personal experiences, using their own voices to define their emic<sup>2</sup> perspective.

**Image:** The term *image* has been defined in different contexts. The definition that most corresponds to the significance of this study is: “A mental picture or concept” (Cayne & Lechner, 1992, p. 483). Here the word “image” is used to refer to the mental picture, idea, or concept about divorce that women have had in society, mainly as a result of cultural beliefs and general experiences. Image is analyzed in this study taking into consideration two variants: self –image and image of others in society, specifically referring to divorced women's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors.

**Divorce:** Divorce has been defined in many ways depending on the area of study and has no constant or uniform meaning. According to Lynne Carol Halem (1980),

To some it signifies the abrogation of a religious covenant; to others, an undesirable consequence of social growth and development; to some, people's inability to reconcile their inner needs and commotion with the demands imposed by society; and to still others, simply the termination of a legal contract” (p. xi).

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Linda Stone and Nancy P. McKee, “an *emic* perspective is the view of an insider, one who belongs to the cultural group in question. An *etic* perspective, by contrast, is that of an outsider observer. (Gender and Culture in America, Prentice Hall, New Jersey 1998, p.5).

Certainly, divorce is not limited to just one of these definitions, but includes many of them. Indeed, a divorce is a separation, a rupture of something previously conceived and established, specifically the breakup of a marriage. Because it has legal ramifications, divorce is also commonly defined within a legal context as “A dissolution, a legislatively created, judicially administered process that terminates a marriage no longer considered viable by one or both of the spouses. It is also termed as Marital Dissolution” (Blacks, 1999, p. 55). In the context of this study, these definitions of divorce will be followed because they are commonly accepted and recognized in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

**Stigma:** *Stigma* has been defined as “A mark or attitude of social disgrace” (Cayne & Lechner, 1992, p. 974). In the context of this study, stigma is used to denote certain behaviors of members of societies towards divorced women. Stigma can be characterized differently depending on the cultural evolution and ramification of each country involved in this study. Although the word “stigma” by itself was not specifically used in the questions of the survey, its meaning was implicitly inferred.

**Behavior:** Behavior can be defined, according to Gordon Marshal (1998), as “an identifiable and measurable response to external or internal, recognizable and measurable stimuli.” (p. 37). Behavior has also been defined as “manners, moral conduct, or the way a machine, organ or organism works with respect to its efficiency; the way in which something reacts to environment” (Cayne & Lechner, 1992, p. 87). In the context of this study, both definitions are applicable. Here I referred to women's behaviors in response to

stimuli (in this case divorce and its cultural connotations), and these responses are transformed into sets of manners and moral conducts, clearly recognizable and widely practiced by divorced women.

**Attitude:** This concept has been variously defined. According to Marshal (1998), it is “an orientation towards a person, situation, institution or social process that is held to be indicative of an underlying value or belief” (p. 28). This is the definition that most accurately reflects the context I wish to express in this study when I refer to the attitude of Latin American women (specifically Puerto Rican and Dominican women) towards divorce and changing family and social roles.

**Culture:** Because this study encompasses different societies, it is important to define the meaning of the word “culture.” Within a sociological context, according to Marshal (1998), “culture is all that in a human society is socially rather than biologically transmitted” (p. 137). Thus, culture is a general term for the symbolic and learned acts of human society; a compound of human values, attitudes, and notions commonly acknowledged and accepted by individuals in a particular society. In this study, the term culture is used to refer to Puerto Rican and Dominican societies, and to foreground the similarities and differences of those two countries' social behaviors and images.

**Americanization:** the adoption of customs, beliefs, or practices characteristic of North America. According to Cayne & Lechner (1992) “The act or process of Americanizing” (p. 29).

**Machismo:** has been defined as a male attitude that exalts masculinity and male dominance. According to Pescatello (1973) *machismo* “is an exaggerated way of exalting the cult of virility, while *marianismo* is directly opposed to machismo, for it exalts the cult of feminine spiritual superiority, according to which women are semi-divine, morally superior and spiritually stronger than men” (p. 91). Machismo is directly supported by the concept of *hembrismo*, defined as the ideology that exalts the passive, abnegated and long-suffering role of females in society. *Hembrismo*, therefore, complements *machismo*, by laying out female roles in Latin American societies. Whereas *machismo* has the dual nature of describing both male nature and male and social roles, *marianismo* only describes female nature. Thus, *hembrismo* completes the formula of *machismo* and allows it to continue to exist by offering social roles for women as dependent on men. *Hembrismo* ideology became the generalized pattern of behaviors for women, creating sets of roles and rules that women tended to follow for generations. These behaviors were reinforced through the presence of the Catholic Church, which played and still plays a major role in determining what kinds of conduct are considered “good” or “bad” for women. The roles of wife, mother, and housekeeper are the ones that *hembrismo* primarily exalts. Along with these roles, the abnegated and passive behaviors attached to them have determined the sphere within which women have been expected to behave. Any behavior outside this sphere has been considered immoral or insulting to the family values imposed by the Church and society.

**Ecological:** “ecology is the scientific study of the interactions that determine the territorial distribution and abundance of organism” (Marshall, 1998, p. 178). This term,

though derived from the biological sciences, is also used to denote the process of interaction between social groups. In this sense, ecology helps to denote the connections between individual characteristics and group-level characteristics.

## THEORETICAL TRADITIONS INFORMING THE STUDY

While many theoretical traditions hold promise in terms of informing this study on divorce and Latin American women, feminism, and ecological conceptualizations of divorce can be applied to the growing number of women impacted by marital dissolution in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This study explores how the divorce experience shapes women's social location and self-image.

Feminist theories help identify and shape ways that women are conceptualized in different contexts. According to Jane Flax (1987), "A fundamental goal of feminist theory is (and ought to be) to analyze gender relations: how gender relations are constructed and experienced and how we think or, equally important, do not think about them" (p. 171). The situation of women in relation to male domination, or the study of gender arrangements, are the distinctive issues pertaining to feminist theory. Given the nature of this study, it is important to rely on the concepts that feminine theory presents regarding women's behaviors and conceptualization. While women may be perceived in a variety of ways depending on the context of their behavior, it seems that male role expectations and standards are still the benchmark by which they are evaluated. Gender relations according to Flax (1987) are "a category meant to capture a complex set of social relations, to refer to a changing set of historically variable social processes" (p. 174) According to this view, male and female roles are bound to change depending on conceptualizations and gender relations of both in society, even when historically these relations have been subjected to a relationship of dominance, in which "women have been defined as 'questions' or the 'sex' or the 'other' and men as the universal" (Flax, 1987, p. 175). Flax (1987) also states "even

when the focus of feminist theory has been to 'denaturalize' gender, the focus can be from culture-bound modes of self-understanding, because women as well as men, internalize the dominant gender's conception of masculinity and femininity" (p. 177). Cultural boundaries help define feminism and feminist tendencies within societies at the same time that feminist theories help to re-define gender roles by promoting and transforming general conceptualizations of gender. Feminist reconstructions of gender allow for changes in behavior patterns replenishing what was traditionally accepted with an alternative set of roles and new possibilities. Transformation of gender roles does not necessarily mean the abolition of traditional roles (because these roles are reinforced by cultural boundaries), but provide new options with regard to the acceptable range of behaviors in a society. As Wright (1989) states, "Feminists have taken the struggle over the production and distribution and transformation of meaning in a number of specific cultural practices as a focus of political intervention and opposition, in order to challenge the forms of representation" (p. 180). According to this perspective every issue related to gender relations influenced by feminist theory in a society has been accomplished by transforming and distributing new meanings of gender and dependency, but always relative to specific cultural boundaries. In the context of this study, divorced women in Latin America undertake the challenges of re-defining their self-image and cultural behaviors as prescribed specifically by Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, leaving behind previously conceived stereotypes and paternalistic notions. These new behaviors are only identified and recognized when they are widely practiced by a considerable number of women who share the same issues and concerns. As Hill Collins (1981) states, "People become more human and empowered only in the context of a community, and only when

they become seekers of the type of connections, interactions, and meetings that lead to harmony” (p. 203).

Feminist perspectives highlight the limitations of cultural attitudes such as *hembrismo* and *machismo* by offering a range of alternatives for women. The opposition of the concepts of *machismo* (the cult of virility) and *marianismo* (the cult of feminine spiritual superiority according to which women are semi-divine, morally superior, and spiritually stronger than men) helped to shape the idea that females and males, because of their respective particular natures, should have different status and roles in society (Pescatello, 1973). In *machista* society, the male is perceived as “aggressive, intransigent in male-male interpersonal relationships, and arrogant and sexually aggressive in male-female relationships”(Pescatello, 1973, p. 90). *Marianismo*, on the other hand, consists of females “exalting their femininity and their ability to produce human life from inside their body” (Pescatello, 1973, p. 90). These two concepts, *machismo* and *marianismo*, along with religion, traditional values, and specific political situations, have created or influenced a wide variety of behavioral patterns in both men and women in Latin America. Examples such as the male role of “head of the family” and the female role of “*esposa-madre*” (*wife-mother*, the one in charge of raising the children, taking care of the husband, running the household, and keeping herself physically attractive to her husband and members of her society) exist (Bose & Acosta-Belen, 1995). These behavioral patterns have remained alive with little variation in most Latin American countries, along with the influence of *hembrismo* (which exalts the passive, abnegated and long-suffering role of females in society).

In the specific cases of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, *machismo* and *hembrismo* have had a different evolution. The Dominican Republic has remained a more traditional culture due to paternalistic behaviors and a closer relationship to the Catholic Church. Therefore, *machismo* is more common and accepted, determining behaviors and images of women as dependents on men (fathers or husbands). Women are reluctant to see themselves as independent and therefore construct their own image as reliant on men, with their main role being to sustain a family within a marriage (which also reinforces *hembrismo*). This concept of dependency is also directly related to economic and social status issues. Women in the Dominican Republic have been integrated into the work force since the beginning of the 1940's. Therefore, their active participation in society as independent members is relatively new, as men have always been considered to be the main breadwinners of the family and men's salaries have been the ones that define social status. Belonging to high social class or status<sup>3</sup> is very important to Dominican people, especially women, as a way to gain respect, admiration, and power. Respect and image are so closely related that the overall impression is one that cannot survive without the other, in much the same way that women believe they cannot project a positive image without a subordinate relationship to men (father or husband). Thus, for Dominican women a typical way to earn and maintain social respect is via family roles, which unfortunately often involves subordinating self-interest and enduring the tasks of raising a family regardless of women's preferences or level of satisfaction.

---

<sup>3</sup> In Dominican society, class and status rely on economic issues. For both men and women, to belong to a high social class is a way of gaining power through admiration and respect. Women usually compete in issues like having the better and prettier homes, best dressed families, number of maids, places to travel, or prestigious schools for their children. For many women, marriage is a way to quickly ascend the social class pyramid.

In addition to rigidly structured family roles and their limitations, *machismo* is further reinforced in the Dominican Republic by the country's close and powerful relationship with the Catholic Church (99% of the religious population in the Dominican Republic is Roman Catholic leaving 1% of other religions combined while only 64.8% in Puerto Rico is Catholic with 28.7% Protestant and 6.5% other religions combined).<sup>4</sup> This relationship is reinforced by the educational system. Most schools in the Dominican Republic are Catholic and educate children within the moral values of Catholic religion, which are predominantly paternalistic.

In Puerto Rico, the idea of women's dependency is not as rigidly reinforced. Puerto Rican women consider themselves more independent and more self-reliant than other women in Latin America. This is related to the economic power that women in Puerto Rico have acquired as a consequence of their incorporation into the work force in 1898, a result of the changes Puerto Rico underwent in its production system due to its alliance with the United States. During the period of 1899-1910, during which the United States established industries on the island, large numbers of Puerto Rican women were incorporated in the labor force, creating a workingwoman culture that still exists today. This situation has placed Puerto Rican women in a more equal position in relation to men, compared to the place Dominican women have occupied. Furthermore, it is common in Puerto Rico for women to contribute as much as men to the family assets, and everyday household chores are commonly shared. In the Dominican Republic, on the other hand, most of the energy of the wife is spent in sustaining the welfare of the family. Working outside the home is done only when it is absolutely economically necessary (Muñoz Vázquez & Fernández Bauzón, 1998). Consistent with traditional gender role ideology, a wife's work in the paid labor

---

<sup>4</sup> Source: [www.welcometopuertorico.org/culture](http://www.welcometopuertorico.org/culture). www.sdq.com

force implies her husband's failure or weakness as the family's breadwinner (Bernard, 1981).

Puerto Rican women, in large part because of their economic status, are more empowered and more independent and therefore their image is not completely defined by their dependence on men. They do not feel the need to gain respect and admiration only by belonging to a high social class based on men's salaries, because they are confident and capable of acquiring any desirable status on their own (Findlay, 1998). Hence one could speculate that *machismo* has less powerful implications for Puerto Rican women, based on their more independent economic status. It is also plausible that relationships between husbands and wives are based on more sentimental interdependencies (similar to modern marriage in the United States), rather than economic or social conditions. This does not mean that *machismo* does not exist in Puerto Rico; certainly it does, but it likely generates less direct influence on the image of women than in the Dominican Republic.

Regarding divorce, the relationship between *machismo* and *hembrismo* follows a distinctive path. Women in Latin American societies, while married, reinforce *machismo* with their *hembrismo* behaviors of abnegation and dependence on males in order to be admired, respected, and thus acquire power. When facing divorce, women are bound to be involved in the work sphere, thereby adding breadwinning to their main roles as mothers, and attempting economic self-sufficiency. Divorce compromises the main structure of *hembrismo* behavior, usually by virtue of financial necessity, but at the very least creating a new possible avenue of empowerment for women. Indeed, given the more likely scenario of economic risk after divorce, the positive consequences of women's breadwinning are generally not understood or emphasized. (Arditti & Madden-Derdich, 1995). Divorce,

along with Feminism, allows for social changes in spite of *hembrismo*. But with centuries of *hembrismo* dictating marital behavior, these changes come slowly and the possibility of empowerment for women, rather than poverty, is diminished. Feminism's challenge to patriarchy has not completely disassembled *hembrismo* itself, but rather produced a variety of more subtle changes, including the possibility of divorce and the presence of female sensibilities in the job arena (Marks, 1986).

Indeed, a feminist epistemology seeks to expose disadvantage, oppression, and make visible the voices of women (Few, Stephens, & Rouse-Arnett, 2003). It is appropriately applied to Latin American women in terms of their experiences of divorce as well as their perception of divorce. Because this study is based on the personal opinions and experiences of women, their voices create a unique sense of identity that separates them from other women who have either not experienced divorce or do not share a Latin American heritage. Divorce potentially becomes a boundary that transforms concepts of self-identity. From a feminist lens, divorce has the potential to be an empowering institution, allowing women to overcome male dependency in Latin America.

Ecological models sensitive to context hold promise in terms of helping us to understand the experience of divorce and how it impacts women, because they emphasize the embeddedness of women in a socio-cultural network that stigmatizes divorce. According to Aulette (2002), "social stigmatization is when people are perceived to be different and less worthy than other people because of their appearance, or behavior. When people are stigmatized others see them as having something wrong with them" (p. 264). Truly, divorce is a situation that in every culture involves a certain amount of stigma, specifically regarding women. This is due to cultural definitions that prescribe the main

roles of women as wives and mothers and the belief that a marriage and two parents (both present in the household) are necessary in order for a family system to be defined as “legitimate” (Guttman, 1993). In Latin America, stigma is also reinforced by codes of cultural conduct imposed by Catholic influences and behaviors like *machismo*, *hembrismo*, and paternalistic ideas. From the ecological point of view, divorce “is a situation that combines micro-level experiences with macro-levels structures and events” (Aulette, 2002, p. 284). When members of a society in general recognize stigma, it becomes a form of ideology affecting not only the inner circle of the divorced women, but also a much greater range of actions and behaviors in society. In the specific cases of Puerto Rican and Dominican divorced women, stigma is present but the range of consequences on divorced women may vary due to each country's particular historical, social, and economic developments. The influence of stigma on divorced Dominican and Puerto Rican women's behaviors is one of the principal foci of this study.

Ecological frameworks also highlight the connection between macro-level systems, such as legal and economic institutions, and individual development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Macro-level institutions, such as the legal system, help organize gender in society and shape the micro-level experiences of divorced women. Because divorce both historically and presently is defined by a particular legal process involving property, child custody and visitation, and the rights and privileges impacting the social location of women. For example, one could argue that divorced women's financial inadequacy illustrates the “macro-micro connection” between forces such as legislation, adjudication, and gender inequality and the “micro” or personal experiences and hardships of women after divorce (Arditti, 1996). Indeed, as Aulette (2002) points out, “Legal structures have a

profound effect on what divorces are like and whether they can even occur" (p. 284).

Within the organization of gender, divorce brings out the awareness of gender inequality in the labor market, discrimination, violence, and economic opportunities, all of which shape the macro-level experiences of divorce in women. Divorce, states Aulette (2002), "plays a critical role in maintaining and in exacerbating the economic inequality between women and men" (p. 284). In Latin America, gender inequality can vary from country to country, depending on each country's particular economic evolution. The tendency is that the more Americanized a country is, the less inequality exists. This can be a result of the influence of feminist movements and activists who, by re-organizing micro-level experiences of divorce, have changed macro-level institutions that formerly promoted gender inequalities and vice versa.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Any discussion of divorce must begin with an understanding of that which is dissolved by divorce: marriage. Marriage has been defined in many ways, but the most universal and common definition and the one that will be used in the present study is “the social institution uniting men and women in special forms of mutual dependence, often for the purpose of founding and maintaining families” (Halem, 1980, p. 10). According to Halem,

To some [divorce] signifies the abrogation of a religious covenant; to others, an undesirable consequence of social growth and development; to some, people's inability to reconcile their inner needs and commotion with the demands imposed by society; and to still others, simply the termination of a legal contract (p. xi). For women in Latin America, divorce certainly does not fit in just one of these definitions, but in many of them. Indeed a divorce is a separation, a rupture of something previously conceived and the breakup of traditional roles for men and women. Religion has played a major role in the definition and context of divorce. Throughout the years, Catholic Church doctrines have maintained that adultery is the principal ground for divorce and that the resulting family dissolution is one of the causes for the disintegration of society. Ecclesiastical laws rely on moral concepts, and as a consequence, the essence of these doctrines are the “fear that divorce, by dissolving the family unit, jeopardizes fundamental values essential to the well-being of individuals and society (Halem, 1980, p. 9).

Christian theologians theorized on the importance and purpose of marriage and divorce as an issue of conflict. The main source of disagreement between Roman Catholic

and Protestant scholars centers on the following report by Mathew of Jesus' response to the question: "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"

Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said:

For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one? So they are not longer two, but one. What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder....

And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another commits adultery (Mathew 19: 3-9, cited in Halem, 1980, p. 11).

Largely uncontested within Christianity for 1,500 years, this passage gained new importance during the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Catholics inferred that all divorce was forbidden, but Protestants concluded that adultery was ground for dissolution. The Protestant common law, according to Rheinstein, "thus strictly followed the 'guilt principle' while the Catholic common law adhered to the principle of complete indissolubility" (cited in Halem, 1980, p. 11). Protestants were more empathetic in matters involving marriage because their way of discouraging divorce extended beyond limiting the acceptable grounds. The permanent status of divorce was to be determined by the nature of the crime. Adultery, a transgression in both Old and New Testaments, was unforgivable. "Only the innocent party was to remarry, thereby permanently branding the guilty one as an immoral sinner" (Halem, 1980, p. 11). To both Catholic and Protestant theologians,

---

<sup>5</sup> The Reformation was the 16th-century religious revolution in the Christian church, that ended the ecclesiastical supremacy of the Pope in Western Christendom and resulted in the establishment of Protestant churches. With the Renaissance that preceded it and the French Revolution that followed it, the Reformation completely altered the medieval way of life in Western Europe and initiated the era of modern history.

violation of the marriage vows was not only an act against religious laws, but also against society, because successful (faithful) marriage was deemed essential for individual morality and by extension, the morality of society.

Divorce has also been defined and conceptualized within a legal context. Since its origins, divorce has had legal ramifications and has been commonly defined as “a dissolution, a legislatively created, judicially administered process that terminates a marriage no longer considered viable by one or both of the spouses” (Blacks, 1999, p. 55). Since the beginning of Roman customary law<sup>6</sup>, the notion of divorce has existed: a husband could always divorce his wife for serious marital fault such as adultery. Under Roman law, the notion of marriage and divorce evolved from patriarchalism. As Susan Treggiari explains: “The earliest evidence of her legal right to compel her husband to divorce her belongs to the time of Gaius, the second century A.D. Divorce was a potential situation of which lawyers and ordinary people had to take into account at the beginning of a marriage” (cited in Rawson, 1991, p. 31). During the Roman Empire and under Roman laws, divorce was a common phenomenon that permitted marriage dissolution without major difficulties. For the Romans, divorce was an option, a way for both spouses to get out of an unsatisfactory marriage. Originally, no standard legal procedure was necessary because decisions followed customary practices. However, after the recompilation of these practices by the Justinian code, and the introduction of the Laws of the Twelve Tables, rules on divorce became more defined and the notion of divorce acquired a legal nature filled with

---

<sup>6</sup> The earliest code of Roman law was called The Law of the Twelve Tables. It was formalized in 451-450 BC from existing oral law by ten magistrates, called Decemvirs, and inscribed on tablets of bronze or wood, which were posted in the principal Roman Forum. According to tradition, the code was drawn up to satisfy the masses, which maintained that their liberties were not adequately protected by the unwritten law as interpreted by patrician judges. The Twelve Tables covered all categories of the law and also included

requirements and procedures. The state was not involved in the termination of a marriage and the interest of jurists was focused on what happened to property and children upon the dissolution of a marriage. Corbier notes especially among the aristocracy, "divorce was used as the circulation of women and wealth, the formation of alliances between families and between individuals" (cited in Rawson, 1991, p. 77). Divorce had during this period of time the goal of making a remarriage possible. After the Roman period, divorce passed through a series of conditions, procedures and legislation due to the Christian imposition of restrictions, the consequences of the Reformation and the French Revolution. During the French Revolution and Empire, divorce adhered to political and cultural developments. The pattern of divorce laws ranged from one European country to the next. Divorce laws were first liberal and then restrictive and implanted in much of Europe by French armies during the Revolution and Empire. In 1816, divorce was described in French legislature as "harmful to society, to religion, to women and to children," according to Roman Catholic principles (Rawson, 1991, p. 77-78).

Since the world is divided in two main legal systems, the Civil Law system and the Common Law system, divorce has been conceived and regulated within these systems. Societies throughout the world have created and maintained their own divorce regulations to fulfill different goals. Specifically, Latin America is mainly regulated by the Civil Law system, which is characterized by the uses of Code, while the Common Law system (used in the U.S.) is characterized by the use of sentences or court decisions (jurisprudence) to set precedence. Puerto Rico's history has put it in the unique position of having a mixture of these legal systems (due to its relationship with the United States) and therefore, Puerto

---

specific penalties for various infractions. The code underwent frequent changes but remained in effect for almost 1000 years. (Terrero Peña, 1994).

Rican society has had a different and more rapid adaptation in the process of modernization. Because the judicial principles of the Common Law system are less abstract than those of the Civil Law system, the former regulate existing issues and solve conflicts in a more practical and logical way. On the other hand, in the Dominican Republic, a Civil Law society, the process of regulating newly arising issues is slower and many times inaccurate, quickly becomes outdated. Since the Civil Law system is more abstract and legislators rule providing a base of regulations and roles for general future norms of conduct through the Codes, changes in these codes have to be made through the creation of new laws or executive ordinances, which takes a very long time to process.

#### SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

In Latin America, the notions of marriage and divorce arrived along with the Spanish conquerors and the Catholic Church. The Church was a part of the Conquest and regulated religious issues as well as all aspects of everyday life (education, health and morals). Latin American culture developed a more dependent relationship on the Church and its doctrines than many Catholic countries in Europe. With regard to marriage, Latin America followed the Civil Law codification based on Roman laws, with Spanish modifications introduced during the colonial period. Divorce, on the other hand, was introduced in each country separately at different times and only after independence from Spain. Since Latin America is composed of different countries, each with its own particular history, there is no one single history of divorce for the entire region. However, similar patterns can be found in the perception of marriage and the consequences of divorce on women, due to the common origin of marriage and the dominance of the Catholic Church.

For the majority of women in many Latin American countries, getting married is the “thing everyone (especially a woman) has to do” in her lifetime, a role that needs to be played. Women, as Rosaura Rodríguez mentions, are “prepared to get married” and they know what to expect and what to do by getting married. Becoming a wife and having a family is the main goal of women; the rest (career, political aspirations) are considered an accessory. There is a popular old saying in many countries of Latin America used mainly by women: “*Matrimonio y mortaja, del cielo bajan*” (marriage and funeral come from the sky), meaning that marriage is in store for everyone, especially for women, the same way as a funeral is: nobody can (or should) escape. This idea of marriage as a necessary phase of life has been culturally passed woman-to-woman, generation after generation. There are no specific rules, documents or laws regulating this tradition, but it is undoubtedly alive at every social level, and there is no doubt that it is influenced by the dogma of the Catholic Church and perpetuated and encouraged by romantic fairy tale ideals that emphasize the equation of marriage to a happy existence, evidenced by the classic fairy tale ending: “*Se casaron y vivieron felices para siempre*” (They got married and lived happily ever after). Not getting or staying married means that the “system” did not work, the promises and fairy tales never materialized. Here is where the feelings of guilt and underachievement appear. Women who do not get married feel that they could not achieve the most important role their society had expected of them. They feel that they lack beauty, intelligence, or simply are not good enough to be rewarded with marriage. On the other hand, divorce compounds women's sense of failure, in that they had the desired prize (i.e. marriage) but confront feelings about not being strong enough, not being wise enough, or not having “what it takes” to sustain a marriage. Divorced women are faced with additional fears of

raising a family on one's own, getting and keeping a job that will economically support the family, and facing society with new roles and a changed social status. In general, given the socio-cultural backdrop of marriage in Latin America, for the majority of women residing there, divorce means a great failure, with compounding degrees of guilt. By extension, a divorced woman is considered the root of the failure.

In Latin America, women are afraid of divorce for various reasons. Some are related to behavior and economic realities while others to beliefs about marital dissolution. First, divorce is considered “unnatural” according to the Roman Catholic Church, which believes that marriages have to last “*hasta que la muerte nos separe*” (until death do us part). Women in Latin America usually grow up listening to that phrase and therefore, its meaning becomes a part of their basic education, especially if we consider that the Catholic Church runs a great number of elementary and secondary schools in Latin America and Spain. Education in Latin America is directly related to class and social status since the colonial times. Families belonging to high social status (*Las buenas familias*) have sent their children, especially their daughters, to “good” Catholic schools, where they receive these doctrines regarding acceptable moral behaviors.

As Rosaura Rodríguez states:

*Y es que siempre estuve preparada para contraer matrimonio. Como lo estuve para hacer la primera comunión y para mi confirmación [. . .] Pero nadie me preparó para divorciarme [. . .] Para mí, este divorcio es una mezcla entre un matrimonio y un sepelio. (1994, p. 15)*

I was always prepared to get married. As I was to make my first communion and for my confirmation [. . .] But nobody prepared me for divorce [. . .] To

me, this divorce is a mixture of a wedding and a funeral.

Generally, in Latin America, divorce is always seen as a failure, and the harm this perspective may create for women is intensified because women are assumed to be the source of the marital failure. For these women, getting divorced means being considered at fault because it translates into the incapacity of women to fulfill their basic role in society: being a wife and a homemaker. The perception of failure is often defined among women by “not being strong enough,” “not being wise enough,” or not having “what it takes” to survive a marriage with conflicts, clearly lacking of “La Capacidad de Aguante”<sup>7</sup> (The Capability to Endure). This endurance ideology exerts cultural pressure on women to try harder to keep their marriage alive, and makes them believe that “a good wife” closes her eyes to situations endangering her marriage.

The perception of women regarding divorce in Latin America has also been influenced by the factor of fear. Women feel powerless to be the ones responsible for raising a family on one's own, getting and keeping a job that will be the main provider for the family, facing society with new roles and a changed social status. This fear is essentially a fear of stigma. Women fear divorce because they fear being stigmatized and rejected by others, especially married women, who represent the image of purity and closeness to the Virgin Mary (*Marianismo*).

While marriage is welcome and blessed, divorce, on the other hand, is condemned and stigmatized. Most marriages in Latin America are performed within a Catholic ceremony and are considered an “act blessed by God,” carried out in a church, with the impression of overall goodness, peace and happiness. Meanwhile, divorce is considered the

---

<sup>7</sup> Term commonly used in the Dominican Republic when someone or something has to endure a difficult situation.

opposite, pronounced in the same place that criminal situations are handled, without any God-blessed ceremony, and with anger and sadness as dominant emotions. Divorce is often considered a sin. Due to the role of the Catholic Church in Latin American societies the rupture of a marriage (considered a Holy Sacrament) is seen as a sin by most women for several reasons. First, divorce represents the destruction of something sacred (i.e. marriage) and the departure from God's wish and will. Something important enough to be blessed by God and have a special ceremony in his church is terminated. Even a marriage that did not begin with a church ceremony, but a civil ceremony instead, is considered to be a "good" marriage in the eyes of God. Second, divorce, like sin, involves a feeling of shame, and a desire to hide the bad behavior or guilt. For this reason, the majority of women in Latin America are afraid to tell relatives and friends about their divorce. Revealing the divorce is perhaps one of the most shameful parts of the experience because it involves acknowledging one's failure and reactions from others characterized by rejection are to be expected. Rosaura Rodríguez states:

*Para mi madre, mi divorcio se había convertido en algo de lo que nadie se debería enterar por su boca. Prefería quedar como idiota aunque todos supieran y ella permanecía ajena a la situación. (Rodríguez, 1994, p. 40)*

For my mother, my divorce became something that nobody should hear about from her. She preferred to look like an idiot, even when everyone knew about it, and she kept herself removed from the situation.

These feelings of doing something wrong or sinful lead many women to feel as if they have to ask forgiveness of society and of God for breaking something that they were taught to endure, even preserve, at all costs. They fear punishment but seek out redemption.

Redemption, though, is achieved only after passing a stage of self-punishment and social scorn, at which point women find acceptance with family members, relatives and society. The paternalistic notions of marriage and divorce in Latin America are still present, even while societies are changing with the process of modernization and globalization, and the traditional roles for women are still reinforced.

### Summary

In summary, the conceptualization of divorce has a long process of cultural evolution. During Roman times, divorce was viewed in a liberal way, with few restrictions on women. With Christianity, this concept of divorce was largely destroyed, and divorce became forbidden by the Catholic Church, until modernity was able to supplant ecclesiastical perspectives in Latin America with more secular approaches to social governance. This Catholic influence has been strong in Latin America, but with recent legal reform, divorce has been recognized, regulated, and assimilated by societies. This process of assimilation has produced a set of consequences, especially on women, which has affected their image and behaviors. Divorced women's image and behaviors in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic are based on cultural issues, legal regulations and the influence of *machismo* (reinforced by *hembrismo*) in both societies. Perhaps the most significant way for women to break with these behaviors and improve their self and overall images is to become more independent (by achieving better economic and social status) in order to be respected and thereby acquire power. Divorce is a potential pathway to achieve this independence. Feminist movements and ecological theory have been useful in

highlighting the connections between macro-level forces, negative socio-cultural attitudes, and women's micro-level experiences of divorce.

## METHOD

### Research Design And Data Collection

The research design used for the purposes of data collection was qualitative in nature, in that it was exploratory and emergent. It can be characterized as useful in examining various instances of interpretative phenomena, in this case the meanings attached to divorced women's images and behaviors in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. Methodologically, a variety of descriptions regarding the experience being researched are considered necessary to explore the nature of the experience (Nelson, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1989). The main source of data collection was an on-line survey. This survey was designed to target Puerto Rican and Dominican women who have experienced divorce through their own personal experiences or through the experiences of a close friend or relative. This survey was completed by a small group of Puerto Rican and Dominican women, contacted via several networks of family, relatives and friends, and via announcements on public and private web-pages, public on-line forums and on-line newsgroups.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the questions in this survey were open-ended, to enable participants to have the opportunity to speak in their own words, and to bring forth aspects of their personal experiences from their own perspective. In addition, some demographic information was gathered for the purpose of describing the sample.

The main purpose of this survey was to explore, expand, and compare my pre-conceived thoughts and viewpoints regarding the situation and image of divorced women in these two countries. I acquired my preconceptions and viewpoints during the time I lived

in the Dominican Republic from my birth in 1967 until 1991 and again from 1998 to 2000 when I returned to live there as a separated/divorced woman. On my return to the Dominican Republic as a separated woman, I encountered many different reactions from family members, relatives and friends, varying from negative to positive attitudes. I was amazed to see how people based their images and conceptualization of divorced women on cultural issues, and paternalistic, *machista* ideas. Within the negative reactions I experienced, many were concerns of family members regarding how society would view me: a failure, an immoral person, a weak woman and someone unworthy of respect. On the other hand, among the positive reactions, I received support and words of encouragement. All of these reactions are direct indications of both cultural tradition and change in Dominican society, and therefore I considered the opposing arguments interesting grounds for exploration.

### Sample and Procedure

The on-line survey consisted of 19 questions, in Spanish, answered by 95 participants. These questions were structured in several sections, starting with the nationality, age, level of education, approximate income, current marital status of the participants, and the existence of descendants. These criteria were chosen in an attempt to value the in-depth knowledge of the participants when referring to issues pertaining to a specific society, and to appreciate differences between the opinions of participants from different educational backgrounds or social class. The next set of questions asked

---

<sup>8</sup> This survey was advertised on: Soc.culture.puerto-rico, soc.culture-dominican-rep., [www.dr1.com/forum](http://www.dr1.com/forum), [www.quisqueya.com/forum](http://www.quisqueya.com/forum), soc.culture-caribbean, soc.culture.latin-america, [www.unibe.com.dr](http://www.unibe.com.dr),

participants their personal opinions about the image and behavior of divorced women in their societies. Here participants were asked to state their personal opinions in their own voices about self- and overall images of the divorced women in their particular societies. The idea of these questions was to compare different perceptions (if any) of divorced women in their societies and how stigma plays a role in their behaviors. The questions were organized as follows: First, participants were asked their general opinion about divorced women. Second, they were asked to describe what their self-image was if they were divorced. Third, participants were to respond and state if they had noticed or experienced any type of stigma from society against divorced women, and were asked to give examples of statements and/or situations involving stigma or discrimination. This section was particularly interesting because the variety of answers foregrounds the cultural similarities and differences between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. The last section asked participants how divorce had affected their personal lives and development and if they, as divorcees, knew of public or private programs in their societies designed to help divorced women (See Appendix 1 and 2).

The coding process was based on thematic analysis of qualitative answers. The purpose of this strategy was to identify and organize themes that portrayed the essential characteristic of an experience or the predominant concerns of participants. Exceptions, variations, and ambiguities in themes within the multiple answers to the survey were also included in the analysis. General coding categories were developed based on survey questions and foci of the study. Consistent with an approach to qualitative analysis described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Gilgun (1992a) coding, identification of

themes, and subsequent interpretation developed over time and reflected a series of modifications based on repeated readings of the data and discussion with my thesis advisor.

Two substantive areas for thematic analysis emerged. The first encompassed participants' attitudes towards marriage. Here several themes influenced participants' answers such as their perceptions of the expected cultural behaviors of married women, the influence of religion in determining these behaviors, the role of marriage in assuring security and social status, commitment to family, and the ideology to endure difficult situations or abuse in order to preserve marriage ("Endurance Ideology"). These themes seemed to emerge in the majority of the answers to questions regarding divorced women's image and behaviors and cultural perceptions of divorced women. Marriage, according to many participants' answers, was considered a powerful institution that must be preserved, and was of central importance to this thematic analysis. The second thematic area encompassed participants' interpretations and attributions regarding divorce, as well as the social and cultural contexts that define their thinking. The thematic context included present and past attitudes towards divorce, negative and positive connotations, religious influences, self and societal images and behavior of divorced women, cultural stigma, the influence of *machismo*, independence, guilt, and economic and social status changes after divorce.

These areas were selected for analysis both because they were predominant in the survey answers, and because they illustrated the study's central concern regarding images and behaviors of divorced women along with how constructions of meaning regarding divorce influenced self and societal perceptions of divorced women. Pseudonyms were used for all participants' responses included in this analysis. Each participant individually

following their own motivation chose these pseudonyms. In many cases, pseudonyms represent nicknames or initials.

## RESULTS

### Participant Characteristics

Based on a preliminary quantitative analysis of 95 participants, the average respondent in this study was approximately 32 years old ( $SD = 8.43$ ). Fifty one percent were from the Dominican Republic, 34% were from Puerto Rico, and 16% were from other Latin American countries. Sixty-five percent reported that they were professionals, 21 % were students, and 14 % were homemakers or not specified. Twelve percent of participants reported finishing high school, 6% attended vocational school, 13 % attended some college, while 48% finished college and 23 % attended Graduate School. Fifty percent of the participants did not have any children. Of the 50% that did have children, 19% had one child, 18% had two children, 12% had three children and 2% had four children. This profile suggests that women who were highly educated, professionally active, and had access to technology completed the survey. Regarding marital status, 27 % of the respondents were single, 45% were married, and 30% divorced or separated. Within the group of divorced or separated participants, the average amount of time of having been divorced or separated was 2.1 years ( $SD= 4.31$ ). Chi-Square tests revealed that for this sample there was no significant difference between women from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic in terms of the likelihood of being divorce. Participants in the study were not necessarily representative of the larger populations of Latin American women in

their respective countries. The total population in the Dominican Republic is 8,833,634 as of the 2000 Census and Puerto Rico's population is 3,897,960.<sup>9</sup> Regarding divorce rates, Puerto Rican divorce rates are 4.47 per 1000 people (census 2000) and Dominican Republic divorce rate is 1.17 per 1000 people (census 1999).<sup>10</sup>

### General Perception of Divorced Women

Individuals create meanings about their lives by sifting personal experiences through received social meanings and expressed interactions (Schneller & Arditti, in press). Cultural context and personal backgrounds influenced interpretations of personal experiences. In the context of this study, participants' interpretations of their divorce were shaped by familial and peer group attitudes towards divorce, as well as their social and religious influences. It was interesting that participants in this study often departed from traditional terms (filled mainly with negative connotations) when discussing divorce, and responses often reflected a more modern trend of attitudes reinforced by positive experiences. This is not surprising considering the demographics of the sample involved in the study (i.e. highly educated and professional).

When asked their opinion on the image they have of divorced women in their societies, participants described many images of divorced women and responded with a wide range of answers. Thematic content seemed to be either negatively or positively balanced with responses varying from condemnation to admiration.

---

<sup>9</sup> Source: US Census bureau, International Database.

<sup>10</sup> Sources: [www.divorcereform.org](http://www.divorcereform.org); U.N. Demographic Yearbook, 1999. The World's Women Trends and Statistics, 2000.

Divorced Women as Successes. Several participants described divorced women in almost heroic terms. A key element of this heroism involved the ability to be independent and stand up to life's challenges. For example, Io from Puerto Rico's response indicated respect, admiration and acceptance towards divorced women: "*La mujer divorciada, es una mujer independiente con coraje para darle de frente a la vida*". "A divorced woman is an independent woman with the courage to meet life head-on." Ds, also from Puerto Rico, stated a similar sentiment: "*Una mujer fuerte y dedicada a triunfar.*" "A strong women, determined to triumph."

CHP, from the Dominican Republic, also emphasized the perception of divorced women as courageous "*Es una mujer fuerte con coraje que ha decidido no ser víctima de nadie ni de sí misma.*" "She is a strong woman with courage, who has decided not to be a victim of anyone, not even of herself."

Dwos, from Puerto Rico, emphasized that an element of courageousness was the divorced women's fighting spirit. "*Una persona que lucha por echar su familia hacia adelante, que tiene que luchar en contra de los estereotipos que existen sobre lo que es una mujer divorciada.*" "A woman who fights to succeed in raising her family, and has to fight common stereotypes against divorced women."

All the previous statements denote sympathy and admiration towards divorced women, exalting values like courage, freedom, strength and dedication to succeed in society. These values are conceived to be the positive consequences of personal growth of divorced women and recognize the empowering aspects of divorce. Indeed, Arditti and

Madden-Derdich (1995) found similar thematic content regarding the emotional benefits and empowering aspects of divorce in their study of divorced mothers in the United States.

Maria del Cielo, from the Dominican Republic, exalted the challenges and determination of divorced women to survive alone in their societies. *“La mujer divorciada, es una mujer que sobrepasa una situación desfavorable y asume el reto de afrontar la vida sin el antiguo compañero.”* “A divorcee is a woman who overcomes an unfavorable situation and assumes the challenge of confronting life without her former partner.” At the same time, in this quote, Maria del Cielo acknowledged the cultural assumption that having a husband made life easier, a typical notion of paternalistic society.

Divorced Women as Failures. In contrast to the previous descriptions emphasizing the empowering aspects of divorce and positive qualities of women who persist in the face of marital dissolution, the majority of responses concerning how one saw divorced women were negative. Descriptions of divorced women ranged from them being cowardly and weak for not persevering or “enduring” in the marriage, to being “whores” or irresponsible. In any case, the implicit message was that somehow a woman who was divorced was at fault.

For example, this woman's response from the Dominican Republic, illustrated the perception that the wife who failed to persist in her marriage, and thus allowed it to dissolve, lacked courage. Martha Laura from the Dominican Republic, stated: *“Las mujeres divorciadas, por lo general son unas cobardes que no supieron mantener su matrimonio. También, son unas mujeres inseguras, que les gusta lo fácil de la vida.”* “Divorced women generally are cowards who didn't know how to maintain their marriages. Also, they're insecure women who like the easy road in life.”

The idea of divorce as the fault of the woman seemed to be pre-eminent. Participant statements exalted the negative connotation of excessive freedom (*libertinaje*) or frivolous behaviors and weakness of divorced women, and reflected the cultural belief that divorced women were considered “easy-prey” for free sex.

The following responses from women who resided in the Dominican Republic reflect the “fault/failure” mentality. Lt, from the Dominican Republic, stated: “*La imagen que tengo de la mujer divorciada es de libertinaje puro, en algunos casos contados imagen de mujer recatada.*” “The image I have of divorced women is of pure libertinism, and in a very few cases, the image of a prudent woman.” Jum, from the Dominican Republic, stated: “*La mujer divorciada es una mujer frívola y débil.*” “The divorced woman is frivolous and weak.”

ADD, from the Dominican Republic, stated: “*La mujer divorciada tiene lamentablemente una mala imagen porque se entiende que ha fracasado en su matrimonio, y que no supo retener a su marido, o fue engañada y se está librando de un infierno.*” “Unfortunately, the divorced woman has a bad image because it is understood that she has failed in her marriage and that she didn't know how to hang on to her husband, or she was cheated on and now is liberating herself from hell.”

Francia Arrabales, from the Dominican Republic, stated: “*En la República Dominicana regularmente la mujer divorciada se ubica a sí misma en una situación de desesperanza y de tragedia.*” “In the Dominican Republic the divorced woman regularly puts herself in a situation of hopelessness and tragedy.” V.E.R.L. from the Dominican Republic, states: “*A las mujeres divorciadas, nos consideran ‘fáciles’ y los hombres sólo nos buscan por sexo.*” “We, divorced women, are considered

'easy-prey' and men only come after us for sex." From Puerto Rico, very few participants expressed negative or non-sympathetic opinions.

Still, Katia, from Puerto Rico, seemed to have an awareness of the negative stereotypes. "*La imagen es que es una mujer que todavía en nuestros tiempos es vista con ojos de rechazo, como alguien que no vale la pena. Debo admitir que en mi país, eso está cambiando, pero lentamente [ . . . ]*" "The image is that she is a woman that, even in our times, is seen with eyes of rejection, like someone worthless. I have to admit that in my country this is changing, but slowly [ . . . ]"

Capability to Endure. It is worth noting that the endurance ideology seems to be at the very heart of the divorced woman's failure. Respondents were specifically asked if they thought a wife should endure violence or any other physical or psychological abuse in order to preserve their marriages and before opting for a divorce. This idea is what is known as "Capacidad de Aguante"<sup>11</sup> (Capability to Endure). This notion has been challenged by feminism but continues to be reinforced by traditional gender role arrangements. Latin American women's perception of marriage empowers them to believe that keeping a marriage from falling apart and keeping a family together is the main role of wives. Enduring difficult situations and many times, abuse, is considered a 'part of marriage.' The necessity of "*Capacidad de Aguante*" is likely related to the wife's economic dependency on her husband. Women endure in order to avoid divorce, and therefore, failure.

As Gitana (from the Dominican Republic) stated: "*La mujer es la que sabe llevar un matrimonio. Debe tratar de soportar para no desbaratar la familia.*" "The woman is the one who knows how to run a marriage. She must try to endure in order to not break up the family."

The definition and limitations of this Capability to Endure are questionable: exactly how much a woman has to endure and for how long may be a personal choice. M, from Puerto Rico's response to the question about whether women should have to endure physical or psychological abuse reflected her ambivalence about her own situation. "*A la verdad mejor ni contesto puesto que los estoy aguantando.*" "Truthfully, I had better not answer (this question) given that I am currently enduring them."

M demonstrates the fact that the tendency to endure abuse in order to save one's marriage is still alive despite the efforts of new laws and institutions designed to protect women from abuse. Still, in both countries, the majority of women disagreed on enduring abuse. In fact, 85 % of participants agreed that nobody should endure any type of abuse, while 12% believed that women should endure difficult situations in order to preserve a marriage and before opting for divorce. Participants in this sample, due to their highly educated background and professional life, (as I mentioned earlier, this survey was for the most part filled by highly educated and professional women) demonstrated a more progressive view contrasting with the traditional values believed to encourage women to endure abuse to preserve marriages. This progressive view can also be associated with the process of Americanization and the influence of feminism and feminist movements in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic.

### Divorced Women's Self-Image

While the previous areas of content tap into generalized perceptions of divorced women from all participants (i.e. married, single and divorced), content pertaining to self image was drawn only from participants who were divorced themselves (recall that thirty

---

<sup>11</sup> Term normally used in Dominican Republic when someone or something has to endure a difficult situation.

percent of participants in this survey were divorced or separated). Not surprisingly, most divorced participants saw themselves in a predominantly positive light, and responses tended to mirror generalized cultural attitudes (i.e. divorce as success or failure) suggesting that women clearly internalize cultural beliefs in terms of self-image. For example, Manolita's response, (from the Dominican Republic), highlighted the empowering aspects of divorce in terms of how she might view herself. "*Como un ser humano al cual se le derrumbó un sueño, pero no la vida... alguien que sufrió, que cambió sus convicciones, y alguien más poderoso.*" "As a human being whose dreams were shattered, but not her life... someone who has suffered, changed her principles, and someone more powerful." Her statement supports Arditti & Madden-Derdich's (1995) finding that the difficulties associated with the divorce experience can become a positive or "growth producing" experience.

Other women internalized the liberation that is achieved by being on one's own. CH, from Puerto Rico, said: "*Como una persona independiente que no he necesitado de un hombre para sentirme totalmente realizada como mujer.*" "As an independent person, who hasn't needed a man to feel complete as a woman."

For some participants, divorce was the gateway to satisfying work or professional careers. For example Yayi, from Puerto Rico, stated that "*Mujer profesional, libre, progresando continuamente en la sociedad y sobre todo feliz.*" "A professional woman, free, constantly progressing in society and therefore, happy."

Other divorced women emphasized benefits of divorce in terms of having greater control over their lives. SH, from Puerto Rico, stated "*Luchadora, no conformista. Que yo misma me encargo de que mi vida sea mejor (con la ayuda de Dios por supuesto).*" "A

fighter, a non-conformist. I myself take control of my life to make it better (with God's help, of course)." Miosotis, from Puerto Rico, stated, "*Después de mayor, bastante madura para canalizar las situaciones post divorcio.*" "After getting older, mature enough to channel post divorce situations."

Naomi, from Puerto Rico, stated "Independiente, capaz, madura, comprensiva, profesional y sentimental, etc. También como una persona a la cual la sociedad no termina de entender." "Independent, capable, mature, understanding, professional, and sentimental, etc. Also a person who is not fully understood by society." M.D. from the Dominican Republic, stated "*Independiente, responsable de mi bienestar, con libertad.*" "Independent, responsible for my own well-being, with freedom." Halyfer, from the Dominican Republic, stated "*Como una mujer sumamente preparada para enfrentar muchas adversidades de la vida, ya que viví una experiencia muy grande que me ha dejado marcada emocionalmente, pero con una gran visión de la vida y de lo que debo hacer.*" "As a woman very well prepared to fight many adversities of life, because I had lived an experience that left me emotionally scarred, but with a broad vision of life and what I have to do." In summary, navigating divorce, while difficult, gave women confidence and experience, which ultimately was empowering.

Still, many internalized cultural images reflected the still predominantly negative stigma and failure perceived to be connected to divorce. Dominicana, from the Dominican Republic, said: "*Me veo muy mal, sola y desamparada.*" "I see myself very poorly, alone and without protection." LLL, from Puerto Rico, said: "*Me veo como un gran fracaso, pero creo que si me divorcié, pues tengo que salir*

*adelante.*” “I see myself as a big failure, but I believe that since I got divorced, I have to move on.”

These participants confirmed a principle of attribution theory in that most people tend to use a range of attributions to explain marital failure, with the purpose to protect or enhance one's self-image (Grych & Fincham, 1992). It is important to remember that married women who have never been divorced, single women and re-married women completed this survey also. According to the preceding statements, the majority of divorced women perceive themselves after divorce with a positive attitude and their statements addressed issues like self-confidence, independence of actions, personal empowerment, personal achievement, autonomy and self-acceptance, all of which can be considered as the positive consequences of divorce. Within the negative consequences of divorce, often participants assumed that divorce was not a primary option, because in general, families disapprove of divorce and parents pass on this attitude to their children. Several participants stated how difficult was for them to take actions that were not acceptable within their family systems. These negative experiences of divorce were intensified by the feelings of failure to conform to family expectations. Participants conveyed that social stigma regarding divorce is still present in both countries.

#### Divorced Women's Image in Society: Cultural Attitudes

Of theoretical significance was the exploration of the “micro-macro” link with respect to the issue of stigma. Responses in the previous section highlighted women's internalization of stigma in their view of themselves and other women who are perceived as

successes in terms of their ability or willingness to remain married instead of opting for a divorce.

Societal attitudes about divorce tended to mirror those that respondents gave specific to their more personalized image of the divorced woman herself. Responses in this section are more focused on how respondents believed their culture (in their respective countries) viewed the divorced woman. Participants responded stating negative and positive perceptions. Answers denoted change in society's perception through time and modernization. Negative perceptions were considered to be societies' link to the past and Catholic traditions, while positive perceptions reflected the newly acquired freedom and power of divorced women.

Progressive vs. Traditional Cultural Attitudes. Clearly, progressive change in terms of a more widespread tolerance of divorce was reflected in several participants' responses about their beliefs regarding cultural norms concerning marital dissolution. NN from Puerto Rico, stated :

*Antes, se tenía la percepción (errónea a mi juicio) de que la mujer divorciada no tenía unos valores arraigados y lo único que quería era 'estar en la calle'. Hoy en día, la gente está más abierta de mente para entender que la mujer divorciada es y ha sido una luchadora (especialmente, si tiene hijos de esa relación)... simplemente, reconoció que la relación que llevaba no funcionó.*

Before, people had the perception (mistaken in my opinion) that a divorced woman did not have any deep moral values and that the only thing she was interested in was 'being on the streets'. Today, people are more open-minded

and understand that a divorced woman is and has been a fighter (especially if she has children)... she simply recognized that the relationship she had didn't work.

CR, from Puerto Rico, stated that

*Creo que la imagen va cambiando. Antes, era muy negativa. Otros hombres no la respetaban. Otras mujeres las consideraban desleales. Ahora la imagen va cambiando a la de una mujer independiente y fuerte que no le va a aguantar vainas a nadie.*

I think the image is changing. Before, it was very negative. Men did not respect these women. Women considered them unfaithful. Now their image is changing into that of an independent and strong woman who is not willing to put up with anything from anyone.

Attitudes from the Dominican Republic were surprisingly similar. EF from the Dominican Republic stated "*Mi sociedad ve a la mujer divorciada como una mujer valiente que afronta el hecho de sobrevivir sola y que debe, en el caso específico de si tiene hijos, mantener una imagen y conducta intachable.*" "My society sees the divorced woman as a brave woman who faces the need of surviving alone, and who has to, if she has children, maintain an irreproachable image and behavior." Mary Joe, from the Dominican Republic, stated "*En esta sociedad que vivimos hay muchos diferentes conceptos de este tema; unos piensan que la divorciada es una mujer fácil (de llevar a la cama) y otros es una mujer independiente, etc.*" "In this society that we live in, there are many different notions

regarding this subject; some think that a divorced woman is an easy woman (to take to bed) and others believe that she is an independent women, etc.”

These statements indicated how Puerto Rican and Dominican societies have undergone changes in their way of thinking about the image of divorced women, supporting a sympathetic view, earned by those divorced women who have broken with the old (but still persisting) stereotypes, but still reflect an awareness of highly stigmatized notions of marital dissolution and what it means to be a single divorced woman in Latin America.

Persistent Negative Perceptions. Some respondents, in discussing their particular country reflect traditionalism and the status-quo (i.e. marital dissolution as non-normative and negative). This lack of progressive change, according to qualitative analysis and historical facts, seemed especially pronounced in the Dominican Republic, which is less Americanized and seems to move at a slower pace in terms of cultural change (although in this sample, chi-square tests revealed that participants in the two countries were not statistically different in terms of the likelihood of holding negative cultural stereotypes. Both Dominican and Puerto Rican participants believed their society had old and traditional concepts regarding the image of divorced women). The qualitative data however, suggested that Dominican women expressed a more visible awareness of negative cultural stereotypes concerning divorce. For example, this woman from the Dominican Republic, when asked how her country might view divorced women, equated divorce with sexual licentiousness. Tabata stated “*La mujer divorciada es vista como una cualquiera,*

*que se acuesta con cualquiera.*” “The divorced woman is seen as promiscuous, as one who goes to bed with whoever.”

There seems to be no distinction between how the individual sees the divorced woman and perceptions about one's culture. Responses seem almost identical, which suggest that cultural attitudes and stigma are fully internalized.

Similarly, other respondents described their country's attitudes in the same terms as how they might have used to describe their own beliefs, and emphasized negative outcomes and the image of divorced women as cultural outcasts. These women discussed how they believed divorced women are seen in their culture. From the Dominican Republic, La India stated: “*La sociedad ve a la mujer divorciada como una mujer desolada, desesperada y abandonada que no se puede valer por sí misma.*” “Society sees the divorced woman as a desolate, desperate and abandoned woman who cannot take care of herself.” Manolita stated

*La percibe con dejación y recelo... Como una persona con una enfermedad contagiosa... siempre juzgan a la mujer divorciada sin 'juicio justo'. La ven como una fracasada, incapaz de cumplir con 'el simple trabajo' de ser esposa. Muchas veces la sociedad limita el radio de acción de las divorciadas y cierran las puertas de su progreso.*

She is seen with abandonment and without compassion... As a person with a contagious disease... the divorced woman is always judged without a ‘fair trial’. She is viewed as a failure, incapable of completing the simple task of being a wife. Many times society limits the possibilities of divorced women and closes the door to their progress.

Naomi's response echoed the same sentiment and also reaffirms marital dissolution as the fault of the women. Naomi stated "*La sociedad ve a las divorciadas, pues como debe ser: como cobardes, que no saben acatar las reglas del matrimonio ni de la iglesia.*" "Society sees divorced women, as well they should: as cowards who do not know how to comply with the rules of marriage nor the rules of the church." Indeed, divorce results from women's failure to comply with cultural norms and religious tenets concerning marriage.

Divorced women are viewed as actively rejected by the culture in which one lives. Mayimbita from the Dominican Republic, stated: "*La sociedad las ve como putas, que no se merecen otra oportunidad. Como fracasadas, que no saben ser mujeres; como débiles y egoístas, que no se sacrifican por su familia.*" "Society sees divorced women as whores, who don't deserve another chance. As failures, who don't know how to be women; as weak and selfish, not willing to sacrifice themselves for their families."

Women from Puerto Rico echoed these thoughts in terms of acknowledging cultural views that divorced women were failures or outcasts. However, negative cultural perceptions were more likely considered within the context of cultural change and improvement. A.M. states: "*La sociedad puertorriqueña, percibe a la mujer divorciada lamentablemente no muy bien y pienso que es por la falta de educación, porque una mujer no se mide por su estatus sino por su valores. Aunque hay que aceptar que la sociedad ha mejorado mucho.*" "Puerto Rican society unfortunately perceives poorly the divorced woman and I think that is due to a lack of education, because a woman shouldn't be measured by her status but rather by her values. Nevertheless, we have to admit that our society has improved a lot." Lulu2002 states

*La sociedad percibe a la mujer divorciada con cierto rechazo, o quizás deba decir miedo. Actualmente, la mujer divorciada se está haciendo reconocer con su buen trabajo y ejemplo de madurez y capacidad. La sociedad está aprendiendo a que la mujer divorciada no se debe juzgar por su vida personal, sino como ser humano, tan capaz y con los mismos derechos del hombre. Hoy día, es tan alto el índice de mujeres divorciadas en Puerto Rico, que ya las personas comprenden que el divorcio no es motivo de rechazo.*

Society perceives the divorced woman with some rejection, or maybe I should say fear. Actually the divorced woman is gaining recognition for her good work and as an example of maturity and capability. Society is learning not to judge divorced women by their personal lives, but as human beings with the same rights and capabilities as men. Today the numbers of divorced women in Puerto Rico are so high that people understand that divorce is not grounds for rejection.

Many statements from Puerto Rican and Dominican participants reflected the negative perceptions of divorced women in both societies. Quantitative analysis showed that when asked if their society discriminates against divorced women, 68% of participants believed it does, while 32% believed it does not. It is likely that these perceptions were based not only on Catholic influences, but also on common cultural stereotypes that elicit the ideas of failure, women's incapability to sustain families, and the connection between divorce and disrespectful behavior.

Religious Influences. Religion was an interesting context in which to consider macro-micro links and to understand how participants viewed themselves after divorce as well as

their responses concerning cultural beliefs. Many times, a person's faith in God offers a comfortable attitude towards divorce, which helps them to cope and face its consequences.

As María, from the Dominican Republic, stated "*Fui divorciada y me considero una persona con cualidades positivas y negativas. Con debilidades, fortalezas y con una gran fe en Dios.*" "I was divorced and I consider myself as a person with positive and negative qualities, with strengths and weakness and with a strong faith in God."

SH, from Puerto Rico, also states, when asked how she perceives herself as a divorced woman "Luchadora, no conformista. Que yo misma me encargo de que mi vida sea mejor (con la ayuda de Dios por supuesto)." "As a fighter, non-conformist. I myself take control of my life to make it better (with God's help of course)."

Other statements reflect the Catholic religion's influence on society and the perception of divorce, and how this perception (considered old and traditional) has influenced women's roles, making them feel responsible for the marriage. As La Beba, from Puerto Rico, stated

*La sociedad ha ido cambiando con el tiempo. En mi país, todavía hay ciertas tradiciones latinas, que se mantienen en vigor. Como la iglesia considera el matrimonio como insoluble por el hombre, y la misma iglesia tiende a ser más estricta y dar más responsabilidades a la mujer, pues el divorcio es visto como 'el mayor fracaso de la mujer'. La sociedad ha considerado al divorcio como el 'mal del nuevo siglo' y a las mujeres que se divorcian como: 'incapaces de mantener una familia'. La sociedad en general, piensa que las divorciadas son irreverentes de los mandatos de Dios, y por eso, muchas veces son rechazadas, mal vistas. Es peor si una divorciada trata de casarse de nuevo o si una*

*divorciada no tiene educación o trabajo.*

Society has been changing with time. In my country, several Latin traditions remain alive. Because the church considers marriage as indissoluble by men, and the same church tends to be stricter and assigns more responsibility to women, divorce is therefore seen as 'woman's big failure.' Society has considered divorce the 'illness of the new century' and divorced women as 'incapable of maintaining a family'. In general, society thinks divorced women are disrespectful of God's rules and therefore rejects and looked upon them poorly. It is worse if a divorced woman tries to remarry or does not have any education or a job.

Naomi, from the Dominican Republic, stated "La sociedad ve a las divorciadas, pues como debe ser: como cobardes, que no saben acatar las reglas del matrimonio ni de la iglesia." "Society sees divorced women, as well they should: as cowards who do not know how to comply with the rules of marriage, nor the rules of the church."

These statements show the close connection between religion, cultural beliefs and self-image. This relationship can determine behavior patterns, commonly accepted by members of a society, thereby creating images and stereotypes. According to the previous statement from La Beba, many times, when a person is deeply religious, negative messages regarding divorce prevail. Religious doctrine contributes to the idea that divorce is objectionable and shameful. Individuals who divorced find themselves in the difficult situation of making a personal decision that contradicts their own belief system.

### The Transmission of Negativity

In considering the issue of social stigma and the internalization of negative social stereotypes regarding divorced women, the mechanism underlying the macro-micro connection (i.e. culture and individual experience) is of interest albeit difficult to isolate. In an attempt to explore the transmission of cultural attitudes, one of the survey questions asked participants if they had heard negative or derogatory comments about divorced women. Because of the cultural similarity between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, it is common for both countries to share idiomatic expressions and popular sayings that became, for the general use, part of the cultural tradition and general knowledge. By trying to collect some of these expressions, one can recognize stigma and stereotypes prevailing in each society.

From Puerto Rico participants expressed a variety of responses. PCH stated “*Yo he escuchado: 'Esa mujer es una cuero'. 'Esa es una irresponsable'. 'Es una loca'. 'No le importan sus hijos'.*” “I have heard: ‘that woman is a bitch.’ ‘She is an irresponsible woman.’ ‘She’s crazy.’ ‘She doesn’t care about her children’.” ZSR, also from Puerto Rico, states: “*He escuchado: 'fulanita se divorció... ahora hay que tener cuidado con ella, pues va a tener la vagina en la frente.' Esto lo dicen más bien las casadas, por el miedo de perder al marido por una mujer divorciada.*” “I have heard: ‘X got divorced... now we have to be careful with her because she’s going to have her vagina on her forehead’ (She’s going to be like a bitch in heat). This is mainly said by married women who are afraid of losing their husbands to a divorced woman.” A Dominican woman, stated

“*Sí he escuchado muchos... en realidad, demasiados... 'Las divorciadas, no son mujeres de confiar'... (dicho mayormente por esposas). 'No quiero que mi hijo se case*

*con una divorciada, pues seguro que no lo merece y lo hará infeliz' (dicho por madres de solterones)'Yo no quiero que la gente me vea como una divorciada más' (dicho por muchas mujeres acabadas de divorciar). Lo increíble es que la mayoría de los prejuicios hacia las divorciadas, vienen de las mismas mujeres... ¿qué ironía, no?"*

“Yes, I have heard a lot... Actually, too much... ‘Divorced women are not trustworthy...’ (Said mainly by wives). ‘I don’t want my son to marry a divorced woman, ‘I’m sure she doesn’t deserve him and that she will make him unhappy... (Said by mothers of older and single men). ‘I don’t want people to see me as just another divorced woman’ (said by recently divorced women). The unbelievable part is that the majority of prejudice against divorced women comes from women themselves. Ironic, isn’t it?”

Indeed, survey results seemed to support Dominican’s opinion, in that it appeared that women tend to be most likely to perpetuate negative images of the divorced woman. Certainly this form of “woman bashing” runs counter to feminist ideals of a supportive sisterhood amongst women. Derogatory comments against divorced women in Latin American societies seem mainly connected to deviation from traditional women’s roles. For example, it is common for mothers to object to the marriage of their sons to previously divorced women, fearing the marriage can be easily dissolved, or that the Catholic Church cannot bless the marriage. Married women criticize divorced women and consider their status as immoral or with a tendency to licentious behaviors. They also fear that divorced women will endanger their marriage, because these women are not subjected to traditional women’s behaviors, and thus may lure their husbands away with their sexual wiles. Such

views of divorced women's behavior create general stereotypes culturally transmitted to other generations.

### Divorced Women as a Special Group

In addition to the transmittal of cultural stereotypes, the idea that divorced women may deserve special consideration also taps into the level of cultural progressiveness in a country as well as the pace of social change. Survey participants were asked if they believed that divorced women should have special consideration in their society. They responded with a variety of opinions. In response to a global survey question about this issue, 36% agreed and 63% disagreed. However, it is interesting to note that some respondents believed that special consideration could also intensify stigma and discrimination connected to divorce. For example, Pocahontas from Puerto Rico stated

*No, porque ellas son iguales a nosotros... pienso que es peor tratar a las personas de diferente manera. Tal vez deban tener un tratamiento con un terapeuta, dependiendo de cuán difícil haya sido la separación, pero en general pienso que ellas son tan mujeres como las casadas o solteras.*

No, because they're the same as us... I think that is worse to treat people differently. Maybe they should get therapeutic treatment, depending on how difficult their separation was, but in general I think that they are as much women as married or single women are.

Aliah, from the Dominican Republic stated

*Desde luego que no necesitan una consideración especial; son mujeres igual que todas. El ser divorciadas no constituye una incapacidad, y mucho menos que se le tenga lástima por ser divorciadas. Si la sociedad las apoya, entonces*

*habrá más divorcios fácilmente. Pero si la sociedad las condena, entonces habría menos divorcios. También, si las separan hay más discriminación”*

Certainly they do not need any special consideration; they're women, same as any, and being divorced does not constitute any disability, nor any reason for people to be compassionate. If society supports them, then we will easily have more divorces. But if society condones them, then we will have fewer divorces. Also if we separate them there will be more discrimination.

ZPQ from Puerto Rico stated: *“No sé, esto puede ser un arma de doble filo, el separarlas como si fuera un grupo especial cuando en realidad son mujeres. Creo que la solución sería lo contrario, educar a la sociedad a aceptar a las mujeres divorciadas como mujeres, sin importar su estado civil.”* “I don't know, this could be a doubled-edged sword, to separate them as if they were a special group, when in reality they're just women. I believe that the solution should be the opposite, to educate society to accept divorced women as women, regardless of their marital status.”

Other women believed that considering divorced women, as a separate group with special needs was an essential aspect of progressive social change. They believed that special consideration facilitated public recognition of growing divorce rates, made visible the consequences of divorce for women, and created new social and cultural contexts to help divorced women's situation. Some of the responses showing agreement were *“Sí, cuando es necesario ofrecerles oportunidades que nunca han tenido o cuando el divorcio es el paso decisivo al salir de un círculo de maltrato. Creo que su trato debe ser igual al de todos.”* (VCA from Puerto Rico). “Yes, it is necessary to offer them opportunities they

never had, or when divorce is a decisive course to get out of a circle of abuse. I believe that her treatment should be the same as everyone's." From the Dominican Republic,

Dominicana stated

*Sí deben tener consideración especial pues son mujeres que hacen el doble del trabajo, y se enfrentan a mayores situaciones. Son tratadas como mujeres sin representación. Son mujeres que necesitan mayor consideración tales como bonos en los sueldos, o ayuda para la educación de los hijos, en vez de mayor discriminación.*

Yes they should have special consideration because they are women that do double work and deal with bigger situations. They're treated as women without representation. They're women in need of better consideration like bonuses in their salaries or help with their children's educations, instead of more discrimination.

The findings of this study provide a rare glimpse at Latin American women's voices concerning divorced women's image and behaviors regarding failure, marital endurance, self- image and societal perceptions, derogatory comments and whether divorced women are worthy of special consideration in society.

## DISCUSSION

This study explored women's perception of divorce in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, paying special consideration to the image of divorced women in both societies. Perceptions of self and the cultural image of the divorced woman were the central focus of the study, although many themes and sub-themes were also explored, which may need further consideration. It is important to point out, however, that participants in this study may not be representative of all Latin American women. Most notably, this was a highly educated group with a high percentage of divorced participants. One can expect that the more educated people are, the more progressive their gender role attitudes will be (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980). Yet, despite the characteristics of the sample denoting the group's likely progressiveness, it is interesting to note the persistence of very negative stereotypes about divorced women. Because the purpose of the study was exploratory, the main objective of the results was to accurately describe participants' own voices. The words of the women included in this analysis are the primary data source of the study. It would be interesting to sample other groups of women from various Latin American countries to expand on this study and explore similarities and differences concerning cultural attitudes about divorce as well as self-image.

### Voices of Latin American Women and the Meaning of Divorce

The current empirical and theoretical literature on divorce offers little information about cognitive and emotional processes involving the image of women in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This study contributes insight into the connections between

Puerto Rican and Dominican divorced women's image and how this image helps maintain common stereotypes. The small sample size limits the generalizability of these findings, but the descriptive analysis allows an understanding of experiential context and personal meanings. All the answers to the survey focus on the interpretative process through which people create understandings about divorce and the consequences these understandings have brought into their lives. Participants stated their perceptions, expectations and beliefs about divorce, all of which refers to the social context attached to the cultural image of divorced women. This study provides some interesting clues regarding the interpretative process relative to marriage and divorce. Indeed, several findings emerged that merit further consideration.

The findings suggest that divorce does not occur in a vacuum, and that the divorce experience itself serves as a basis for descriptions of image, not only regarding divorce, but also involving marriage. For example, participants in this study discussed their reluctance to divorce because they had internalized not only the positive social and religious norm of marriage as a permanent commitment, but also the negative familial and religious valuation of divorce. It seems as if Latin American women expect their marriages to be permanent, but when their marriages end, their beliefs are shattered and their self-image and future behaviors and expectations challenged. The interpretation of marriage as an indissoluble institution has changed. Marriage is no longer considered strong or unbreakable, but rather vulnerable and uncertain. The interpretative process of divorce also suggests attitudinal shifts for some women after their marriages end. Divorce moved from being traditionally considered as shameful or debasing, to a more socially acceptable state whereby people find a valid way to end problematic marriages.

Even when the primary focus of this study is not on the effects of divorce on women's professional or family lives, participants' answers denoted concern about these issues. There is no doubt that divorce affects the family structure. Divorced women in Latin America are stigmatized due to changes in their economic and social situation. Divorced women in both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic have to cope with negative social attitudes regardless of whether their own behavior fits the stereotype after divorce. Many studies in the United States have examined adjustments to divorce based on a framework centered on stress, coping, and disruptions in the social and physical environment of the family (Amato, 2000; Simons & Associates, 1996). These studies specify the life changes and events stressful in divorce, such as lowered income, loss of friends, moving, (Wang & Amato, 2000), legal issues and parenting challenges (Kitson, 1992), as well as adult psychopathology and the presence of maladaptive behaviors such as drug/alcohol abuse (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978). Stress and coping framework studies also have documented resources that help people cope with the stress of divorce, such as education, employment, supportive friends, positive perceptions of their situations, new and intimate relationships (Wang & Amato, 2000), and psychological detachment from former spouse (Kitson, 1992). Despite this voluminous research in the United States, little emphasis is given to more interpretive aspects of the experience such as the meanings attached to marriage and how this might impact the divorce experience (Schneller & Arditti, in press). Indeed, there is limited information about cultural and self-images around divorce—specifically in Latin America, where divorce continues to be somewhat of a taboo topic.

Social constructionism, an interpretive approach that includes social context, provides a useful lens for considering the findings in this study, because of its emphasis on the centrality of people creating knowledge and meaning through language interactions. (Schneller & Arditti, in press; Gergen, 1985). According to Bogdan & Biklen (1998), social constructionism is considered to be the basis of many assumptions of qualitative research. Therefore, social constructionism provides a framework for understanding that meaning is relative to an individual's language and to social and historical context. In this study, it helps to provide a basis for understanding that reactions to divorce are impacted by language in terms of the explanation an individual makes, by social interchange with others, and the cultural meanings of marriage, divorce, image and behaviors influencing a person's perceptions (Gergen, 1985). For example, participants described how disapproving messages from family, friends and the Catholic Church, as well as stigmatizing attitudes within their social circles, intensified the distress of divorce. Nonetheless, several participants noted the historical changes associated with divorce and stated that there is currently an increased acceptability of divorce in both countries as a legitimate way of dissolving problematic marriages.

Language in this study plays a revealing role in terms of how participants interpret and internalize images about divorce. Overall, participants expressed themselves using very dramatic language. Strong direct commands and expressions were used to convey personal opinions and concerns, and to denote cultural negative perceptions of divorced women's image, specifically when participants repeated derogatory comments commonly heard in their particular society. Some of this language was quite strong and sexually charged. At

the same time, a "softer" more sympathetic language was used to state opinions of emotional despair and hopefulness.

Because divorce is a well-known disruptive life event as well as an experience filled with social meanings, it motivates people to interpret and make sense of their personal experience (Riessman, 1990). Many participants in this study, both from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, described divorce as a major event that changed their understanding of themselves in their societies. It is likely that divorce changed their functions and roles to include professional and wage-earning activities. It is possible that for Dominican divorced women, these changes may be more dramatic, if in fact they are more likely to be economically dependent on their husbands than Puerto Rican women. The data does not specifically address this possibility, but it is certainly deserving of follow-up via the collection of more detailed economic and family information.

Dominican women talked about being in an inferior role while married, and some had experienced verbal and physical abuse. Feminist writers emphasize the connection between patriarchy and abuse of woman, maintaining that the possibility of domestic victimization is heightened due to gendered roles in marriage whereby women are subordinate (Blaisure & Allen, 1995; Schwartz, 1994). Many Dominican marriages are often characterized by socially sanctioned roles of the husband as the head of the household, and the wife as a source of support to husband and children; therefore, inequality becomes inevitable. One could speculate that in more egalitarian Latin American societies, such as Puerto Rico, it is likely that women are economically more independent and less subjected to male dependency. Still, couples may struggle with inequalities due to

economic discrepancies in which the husband has greater earning power, and due to social biases that devalue the importance of the wife's career (Riessman, 1990).

For participants in this study (Puerto Rican and Dominican) it seemed that the personal experience of divorce was an important force in shaping pre-conceived notions regarding image. Divorce also seems to have precipitated growth in many areas of personal development, which resulted in rich post-divorce experiences such as professional advancement, new skills and interests, new and more fulfilling relationships, and also reshaped their views and perceptions of self and societal image.

### Divorced Women and Stigma

The qualitative analysis provides rich text revealing that prejudice still exists in Dominican and Puerto Rican societies. Even when modernization and changes in social structures are redefining the image of divorced women, these changes are slow to take hold, especially for Dominican divorced women. On the other hand, it seems that Puerto Rican participants were more sympathetic toward divorced women in general, and that their society has a more modern and open-minded approach, with less stereotypes.

By analyzing the statements on the survey made by Dominican women about the negative perceptions they have about divorced women, we can note various thematic issues. For example, Martha Laura's statement speaks about the perception of licentiousness, based on the belief that divorced women are more promiscuous than women with in any other marital status. These beliefs originate in the notions of purity and virginity (*Marianismo*) that have prevailed in the Dominican Republic and in all of Latin America since the conquest. Even in modern times, women who engage in sexual

relationships before marriage are considered promiscuous, because women are expected to retain their virginity until married. Interestingly enough, divorce plays a double role for women in these societies, because it not only frees them from a bad marriage, but also from the pressure of having to be married in order to have sex. For some women, this newly found freedom gives them a sense of power, much needed at the time of divorce, when psychological consequences tend to lower their self-esteem.

Other statements, like ADD's from the Dominican Republic, accuse divorced women of cowardice because they did not have "what it takes" or because they did not fight long or hard enough to save their marriages. This statement clearly speaks of what is known as: "La Capacidad de Aguante" (The Capability to Endure). This cultural philosophy puts pressure on women to try harder to keep their marriage alive, and makes them believe that closing their eyes to imminent situations endangering their marriages is a wife's job.' None of the participants mentioned what specific things a woman should endure or for how long, but it is well known that in Puerto Rico, to offer one example of spousal abuse in these societies, more than half of all murdered women were victimized by their own husbands.<sup>12</sup> What things married women endure and the reasons for enduring them are related to the notion of romantic love that prevails in these two societies.

According to Marya Muñoz Vázquez and Edwin Fernández Bauzó this notion of romantic love is inherited from several cultures in ancient Europe and Asia, where pure love was differentiated from sexual love. Pure love has been defined as the love of the mind while sexual love is the corporeal counterpart. Pure love is characterized as noble, creative, spiritual, loyal and inspirational. It is the kind of love women have to feel in order to pay

---

<sup>12</sup> Source: Article: "Cincuenta Por Ciento de Mujeres Asesinadas son Víctimas de sus Esposos" by I. Cintrón. El Mundo Newspaper, P.1, 5A, 1981.

homage to the Virgin Mary and be considered pure and admirable. Women, because of their presumed natural sensibility, are more often associated with this kind of love. Sexual love, on the other hand, following the precepts of *machista* societies, is associated with men. Men are expected to be promiscuous and consequently, they are not required to enter marriage without any prior sexual experience (Muñoz Vázquez & Fernández Bauzó, 1998). Married women in Latin America (raised within the rules of the Catholic Church and influenced by stories from the Bible and romantic poetry) are expected to fulfill these ideals of virtue and therefore “must” endure the sexual conduct of men, even after marriage. Even when adultery is a legal ground for divorce, many women forgive an unfaithful husband at least once, before divorcing on grounds of adultery, making this situation one of the most commonly endured.

#### Culture and the Self: Self-Image of Divorced Women

Participants (both from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico) who responded with a positive attitude regarding self-image after divorce agree that after a period of adaptation, their divorce had a positive impact on their lives. They also agree that their image is what they make of it and not what members of their society impose. On the other hand, participants responding with a negative attitude towards their self-image after divorce addressed issues like loneliness, regret, hopelessness and failure. These participants are still struggling to find their place in their society and are measuring themselves against the existing stereotypes and traditional roles prescribed for women. For some women, divorce is a symbol of failure and fear, thus making it difficult for them to consider any positive outcomes. Some divorced women believed their image is and always will be negative and therefore they are afraid to face negative reactions from people in their society. For them, it

is very important to try to fit within the concept of “the perfect family.” Thus, getting divorced is to break with this idea and they become “female-failures” for not having achieved the basic task expected of every woman: sustaining a family. Thus, being divorced is equated with the loss of respect within one's family, community and cultural reference group. The importance of feeling respected should not be underestimated. Being respected as women by the members of society is the fastest way to build status, as a first step toward the greater goal of acquiring power. In both societies, Dominican and Puerto Rican, women rely on respect to become empowered. Being divorced (and being seen as a failure) means a big setback for all women in the big journey towards power. It is a cultural belief that if a woman gets divorced, it is because she was not capable of the single task of sustaining a family and therefore she is not trustworthy for more difficult tasks like being professionally or political successful.

The importance of projecting a positive marital/family image is paramount for women in Latin America as the best and fastest way to gain power in societies that are still predominantly *machistas*. Women, divorced or not, struggle everyday to cope with *machismo* and establish status within their societies. Divorced women have an even greater challenge to overcome, by changing the overall existing negative image of divorce and turning it into a positive image. According to this survey, this change in image may be on its way because divorced women are expressing, in the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, a more positive attitude and less fear about divorce.

Due to historical facts and the process of Americanization, Puerto Rican society may have undergone more changes and have more progressive images of divorced women. These changes may also be due to a faster and more expansive process of modernization

and the creation of legal and social institutions following examples from the United States. Also, women in Puerto Rico have been integrated into the work force (since 1898) (Findlay, 1998), much earlier than Dominican women (in the 1940's) (Terrero Peña, 1984), making them more independent, and capable and confident of raising a family on their own, thus, breaking the common stereotypes.

Cultural stereotypes against divorced women have similar connotations in both countries, even when their histories, economic conditions, laws and institutions are different. The cultural identity that these two countries share provides the basis for these stereotypes, but changes to this identity are directly related to modernization of social structures. Time and pace of this modernization process is what will continue to play a determining role in defining these societies' new structures and in differentiating the notions and concepts that sustain them. The main source in this study for identifying cultural stereotypes against divorced women has been the analysis of the participants' answers to the survey regarding divorced women's self-and societal images. These images have been reinforced by derogatory comments about divorced women's behaviors. The majority of the derogatory comments expressed in the survey, addressed behaviors considered licentious or immoral. In both countries, comments are mainly heard in women's circles but likely passed on to male circles, as well as to future generations. The impact of these comments on divorced women affects their self and societal perception and therefore, their internalization of their divorce experience. Generally, these comments are filled with misinformation and keep alive in both countries false and negative stereotypes that are difficult to defeat.

Societal Responsiveness to the Needs of Divorced Women

Due to the impact that divorce has on women and considering the cultural changes on divorced women's image and behaviors, participants were asked to state if a special recognition is needed from society to accommodate divorced women. According to several statements obtained in the survey, participants from the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico seemed still reluctant to have divorced women classified as a different group or to have special consideration from society. An overall general belief is that intervention from any social institution can result in a more stigmatizing factor for divorced women. In the Dominican Republic, women have a lack of confidence in public social institutions, and fear the fact that being considered different from the rest of society, is not going to help them achieve their desired place, as respected trustworthy people. Another possibility is that Dominican women know that making rules and giving them social benefits are not going to influence their image in a positive way, even though it may help economically, morally and psychologically these benefits will not accomplish much. They fear that stigma will play a bigger role. Indeed, there is some truth to this fear. Often, timed interventions aimed at marginalized groups, in this case divorced women, can in fact be stigmatizing (Gottlieb, 2000). Dominican women make an effort to try to impress other people or other women to feel admired (with their household chores, cooking, raising children and accommodating their husbands), because they believe this is a way of gaining respect, which it likely is, given the importance of the role mother-nurturer. Being divorced and stereotyped as a failure will not impress others in this regard, and being separated in a new cultural category and considered different may only make it worse. On the other hand, according to this survey, many participants agreed on having divorced women categorized

as a special group, which suggest that Dominican women still dream about obtaining social help and special consideration from society.

According to several opinions in the survey, Puerto Rican divorced women expressed a tendency of being more independent, and do not believe that respect is only gained by impressing other people (or women), but rather by their own professional, economic or socio-political accomplishments. Their answers were more progressive and they do not feel the need of having divorced women categorized in a different group, because they feel it will not make any difference on their current image. They do believe, according to several statements in the survey, that the only benefit of being considered as a special group is to bring attention to the overworked and stressed situation of divorced women.

Puerto Rican divorced women have experienced the power of having public or private organizations that help divorced women, such as *Organización de Personas Divorciadas* (Organization for Divorced Persons), which is dedicated to educate and organize meetings and discussion groups regarding the effects of divorce. In the Dominican Republic, this type of organization does not exist in the same way. The only institutions in the Dominican Republic dedicated to help women are the *Secretaría de Estado de la Mujer* (State Department of Women's Affairs), which mainly helps women with information and counseling in cases of physical abuse or extreme economic situations, and the *Tribunal para Asuntos de la Mujer* (Court for Women's Affairs) which helps women victims of physical abuse (by helping them legally to seek protection) and in cases regarding child support. Both institutions are public, and thus, lack sufficient funds. Also the slow pace of granting help or support makes women uncomfortable in trusting them, and therefore,

women tend to not look for help. Women then feel unprotected and alone. Dominican divorced women feel powerless and often confused on how to get help after divorce. They hope that someday their country and government will be able to provide the much-needed help.

## CONCLUSION

When comparing the perception of divorce in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, similar trends seemed to define it. Cultural issues, progressiveness and personal experiences are the main influences on societal and self-images in both countries, which are also reinforced by language interactions between women. In many instances, women's roles are affected by their perception of their societal and self-images, and behaviors tend to be modified.

Regarding divorce, notions of cultural and self-image become more crucial for women in both countries, because they can add fear of failure and social instability. Because marriage is the traditional institution that creates stability, social status and power for women in Latin America, divorce adds an extra stress in their overall image-definition because it makes it harder for divorced women to be admired and respected and for them to acquire power in their society. Divorce is also considered highly stigmatizing in any society, a statement that is also applicable for Dominican and Puerto Rican societies. As several participants stated in the survey, in general, the overall image of divorced women in Dominican and Puerto Rican society is still quite negative, even though progressive attitudes are slowly emerging, as the divorce rate continue to grow. Still, many women are reluctant to get divorced and are inclined to endure difficult situations within the marriage, before opting for a divorce. This attitude is what has kept the "endurance ideology" alive in both countries. The endurance ideology is still present in both countries, and they are not significantly different. Qualitative analysis of the participants' answers revealed traditional and rigid gender prescriptions, as women tend to endure difficult marriages to avoid

changing or losing their social or economic status, and thereby the respect or admiration of their society. Therefore, the concept of self-image for divorced Latin American women is measured against their situation of dependency. Many Latin American women tend to rely on their status as wives and mothers in order to obtain respect and power—the home being the traditional sphere of influence for women (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980). For many Latin American women, divorce is the most profound type of failure.

For divorced women who have internalized more progressive attitudes and positive self-images, the capability to endure is less influential. To the extent that Latin American women are westernized (as is increasingly the case in Puerto Rico), they will rely less on traditional roles and their relationships with men to obtain respect and power. Thus their attitude toward divorce is likely more positively constructed. Progressive versions of divorced women's self-image are based less on economic factors and more on autonomy and the ability to be admired and respected on their own merit. Latin American women, in countries that benefit from the contributions of public and private social institutions and organizations, are more accepted by society, and thus, their overall divorce experience and cultural or self-image tends to have more positive outcome.

In summary, the conceptualization of divorce has culturally endured a long process of evolution. During Roman times, divorce was perceived in a liberal way, with few restrictions on women. With the advent of Christianity, this liberal concept of divorce was largely destroyed, and divorce became forbidden by the Catholic Church until modernism was able to supplant ecclesiastical perspectives in Latin America with more secular approaches to social governance. This Catholic influence has been strong in Latin America but, with the help of laws, divorce has been recognized, regulated and assimilated by

societies. This process of assimilation has had a set of consequences, especially on women, affecting their images and behaviors.

Divorced women's cultural and self-images and behaviors in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic seemed to be based on cultural issues, laws, regulations and the influence of *machismo* (reinforced by *hembrismo*) in both societies. It seems that the fastest way for women to break with these behaviors and improve their self and overall images is to become more independent and develop alternative sources of economic and social power.

In closing, the importance of the on-line survey lies within its cultural context. The main idea of this survey is to explore the different opinions of Puerto Rican and Dominican women regarding their perception of divorce and the cultural and self-images and behaviors of divorced women in both societies. At the same time, this survey can also be used as a form of evidence, as all answers given relied on personal or semi-personal experiences of the participants, and on generally known but insufficiently documented cultural issues. What this survey provided was a general view of women's opinions regarding the cultural and self-images and behaviors of divorced women in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic as well as in Latin America. This information, combined with my own experiences and knowledge of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico, allowed me to explore, expand, and better understand the divorce experience.

Hopefully this study can help create self and cultural awareness regarding divorced women's images and behaviors, which would result in more positive outcomes and societal responsiveness. After all, the definition and place of divorce within a society is to a large

extent socially constructed, each day, and it is time for a new “conversation” about divorce which challenges traditional definitions of failure and success for Latin American women.

REFERENCES

- Amato, P.R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1256, 1287.
- Arditti, J. A. (1996). Women, divorce, and economic risk. *Family & Conciliation Courts Review*, 35, 79-89.
- Arditti, J.A. & Prouty, A.M. (1999). Change, disengagement, and renewal: relationship dynamics between young adults and their fathers after divorce. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 25(1), 61-81.
- Arditti, J.A. (1999b). Rethinking relationships between divorced mothers and their children: capitalizing on family strengths. *Family Relations*, 48, 109-119.
- Arditti, J.A., & Madden-Derdich, D.M. (1995). No regrets: custodial mothers' accounts of the difficulties and benefits of divorce. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 17, 229-248.
- Arditti, J.A. & Allen, K.R. (1993). Understanding distressed fathers' perceptions of legal and relational inequities post-divorce. *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 31, 461-476.
- Aulette, J. R. (2002). *Changing American families*. University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill, NC: Allyn and Bacon, 264-284
- Bernard, J. (1981). The good provider role: its rise and fall. *American Psychologist*, 36, 1-12.
- Blacks, Henry Campbell (Ed.). (1999). *Black's Law Dictionary*. St. Paul MN: West group, 55.
- Blaisure, K.R., & Allen, K.R. (1995). Feminist and the ideology and practice of marital equality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 5-19.
- Bloom, R.C., Asher, S., & White, S. (1978). Marital disruption as a stressor: a review and analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 85, 867-894.
- Bogdan, R.C. & Biklen, S.K. (1998). *Qualitative Research For Education: An Introduction To Theory And Methods*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bose, C. E. & Acosta-Belen, E. (1995). *Women In The Latin American Development Process*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 197.

- Bronfenbrenner, U. 1979, *The Ecology Of Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Cayne, B. & Lechner, D.E.(1992). *New Webster Dictionary And Thesaurus Of The English Language*. Danbury, CT: Lexicon Publications, Inc.
- Corbier, M.( 1991). Divorce and Adoption as Roman Familial Strategies. In Beryl Rawson, Ed. *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Humanities Research Centre: Clarendon Press, 77.
- David, R. (1973). *Los Grandes Sistemas Jurídicos Contemporáneos*. Madrid, España: Ediciones Aguilar, S.A.
- Flax, J. (1987). Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory. *Journal of Woman in Culture and Society*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago. p.170, 171, 174,175,177)
- Few, A., Stephens, D., & Rouse-Arnett, M.(2003). Sister-to-sister talk: transcending Boundaries and challenges in qualitative research with black women. *Family Relations*, 52, 205-215.
- Findlay, E. J. (1998). Love in the Tropics: Marriage, Divorce and the Construction of Benevolent Colonialism in Puerto Rico, 1898-1910. In Gilbert M. Joseph, Catherine C. Legrand, Ricardo D. Salvatore (Eds.) *Close Encounter with Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S. -Latin American Relations*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Furstenberg Jr., F.F., & Spanier, G.B. (1987). *Recycling The Family: Remarriage After Divorce*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, 40, 266-275.
- Golbert, A. S. & Nun, Y. (1982). *Latin American Laws And Institutions*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Gottlieb, B.H. (2000). Selecting and planning support interventions. In S. Cohen, L. Underwood, & B. Gottlieb (Eds.) *Social Support Measurement And Intervention: A Guide For Help And Social Scientists*. New York: Oxford University Press. 195-221.
- Green, D. (1997). *Faces Of Latin America*. London: Latin America Bureau.

- Grych, J.H. & Fincham, F.D. (1992). Marital dissolution and family adjustment: an attributional analysis. In T.L. Orbuch (Ed.). *Close Relationships Loss*. New York: Springer-Verlag, 157-173.
- Guttman, J. (1993). *Divorce In A Psychosocial Perspective*. Hillsdale, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Halem, L. C. (1980). *Divorce Reform*. New York: The Free Press, 9-11.
- Helmholz, R. H. (1974). *Marriage Litigation in Medieval England*. London, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Hill Collins, P. (1981). One Is Not Born A Woman. In *The Straight Mind*. Hemel Hempstead (Ed.), Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992. 9-20.
- Kitson, C.G. (1992). *Portrait Of Divorce: Adjustment To Marital Breakdown*. New York: Guilford.
- Lucas, A. M. (1983). *Women in the Middle Ages: Religion, Marriages and Letters*. Brighton, Sussex, New York: Harvester Press.
- Marks, S.R. (1986). *Three Corners: Exploring Marriage And The Self*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath And Company.
- Marshall, Gordon, ed. (1998). Oxford: *Dictionary of Sociology*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mazeaud, Henri Léon and Jean. (1976). *Lecciones de Derecho Civil, Primera Parte, Volumen IV* (Lessons on Civil Rights, Part One). Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones Jurídicas Europa-América.
- Muñoz Vázquez, M. & Fernández Bauzó, E. (1998). *El Divorcio en la Sociedad Puertorriqueña* (Divorce on Puerto Rican Society). Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 27-30.
- Nelson, J.L. (1990). Phenomenology as feminist methodology: explicating interviews. In K. Carter, & C. Spitzack (Eds.), *Doing Research On Women's Communication: Perspectives On Theory And Method*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Nida, E. A. (1969). *Understanding Latin Americans*. Pasadena, California: William Carey Library.
- Pescatello, A. (1973). *Female And Male In Latin America: Essays*. Pennsylvania: University Of Pittsburgh Press, 90-92.

- Phillips, R. (1998). *Putting Asunder*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Polkinghorne, D. E. (1989). Phenomenological research methods. In R.S. Valle & D.E. Halling (Eds.), *Existential-Phenomenological Perspectives In Psychology*, 41-60.
- Rawson, B. (Ed.) (1991). *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Humanities Research Centre: Clarendon Press, 31.
- Rheinstein, M. (1980). Marriage stability, divorce and the law. In Lynne Carol Halem, (Ed.) *Divorce Reform*. New York: The Free Press.
- Riessman, C.K. (1990). *Divorce Talk: Women And Men Make Sense Of Personal Relationships*. New Brunswick & London: Rutgers University Press.
- Rivera Ramos, E. (2000). *The Legal Construction Of Identity: The Juridical And Social Legacy Of American Colonialism In Puerto Rico*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Rodriguez, R. (1994). *Bienvenida Al Club Del Divorcio (Welcome to the Divorce Club)* Mexico: Editorial Diana, 11-15, 40.
- Scanzoni, J., & Szinovacz, M. (1980). *Family Decision Making: A Developmental Sex Role Model*. Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Schneller, D. & Arditti, J. (In Press). Interpreting divorce and rethinking intimacy. *Journal Of Divorce And Remarriage*.
- Schwartz, P. (1994). *Love Between Equals: How Peer Marriage Really Works*. New York: The Free Press.
- Simmons, R.L., & Associates. (1996). *Understanding Differences Between Divorced And Intact Families: Stress, Interaction And Child Outcome*. London: Sage.
- Song, Y. I. (1991) Single Asian American Women as a Result of Divorce: Depressive Affect and Changes in Social Support. In Sandra S. Volgy (Ed.) *Women and Divorce / Men and Divorce: Gender differences in Separation, Divorce and Remarriage*. New York & London, The Haworth Press.
- Stain, Stanley and Barbara (1970). *The Colonial Heritage of Latin America*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics Of Qualitative Research: Ground Theory Procedures And Techniques*. Newbury Park CA: Sage.
- Tacitus, Cornelious. (1999). *Germania*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

- Terrero Peña, P. (Ed.) (1984). *Código Civil de la República Dominicana* (Dominican Republic Civil Code). Santo Domingo, República Dominicana: Editora Taller C. por A.
- Treggiari, Susan: "Divorce Roman Style: Ease and Frequency. In Beryl Rawson (Ed). *Marriage, Divorce and Children in Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Humanities Research Centre: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Wang, H. & Amato, P.R. (2000). Predictions of divorce adjustments: stressors, resources and definitions. *Journal Of Marriage And The Family*, 62, 655-669.
- Weiss, R.S. (1975). *Marital Separation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wright, E. (1989). Thoroughly postmodern feminist criticism. In Theresa Brennan, (Ed.). *Between Feminism And Psychoanalysis*. London: Routledge. 146-50

APPENDIX A

Qualitative and Quantitative Coding

Coding Schema (Qualitative)

**Content Areas and Major Themes**

*Content Area (In italics)*

*Marriage*

Coding Categories:

1. Attitude Towards Marriage

A. Themes:

Expected Cultural Behavior of Married Women  
Religion  
Security and Social Status  
Commitment to Family  
Endurance Ideology  
Marriage as Power Institution

*Divorce*

Coding Categories

1. General Perceptions

A. Themes:

Present Attitudes  
Past Attitudes  
Negative Connotation  
Religious Influences

2. Divorced Women Image

B. Themes:

Self-Image  
Societal Image (According to women)  
Failure  
Machismo  
Behavior of Dominican and Puerto Rican Divorced Woman  
Cultural Stigma  
Personal experiences

3. Effects of Divorce

C. Themes:

Personal Development of Divorced Woman  
 Economic Changes  
 Social Status Changes  
 Behavior Changes  
 Independence  
 Guilt

Code Book (Quantitative)

**Situation and Image of Puerto Rican and Dominican Divorced Women's Survey**

<u>Variable Name</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Coding Information</u>	<u>Question on Survey</u>
Id	Participant's Nickname	Three digit code 001-100	1
Age	Age in years	# Of years	2
nat	Citizenship	1=Dominican, 2=Puerto Rican or American, 3= Other	3
Occup	Occupation	1=Student, 2=Professional	4
Edu	Level of Education	1=High school, 2=Vocational School, 3=Some College, 4=College, 5=Master, 6=PhD, 7=Other	5
Money	Type of Money	1=Dominican Peso, 2=Dollars	6-B
Inc	Approx. Monthly income	# Quantity	6-A
Marsta	Marital Status	1=Single, 2=Married, 3=Divorced or Separated	7-A
Howlong	If divorced, for how long (When applicable)	# Of years	7-B
Notdiv	If not divorced, know any divorced women	1=Yes, 2=No	8-A
Rel	Relationship with Divorced woman	1=Mother, 2=Sister, 3=Aunt, 4=Grandmother, 5=Sister in Law, 6=Friend, 7=Other	8-B
Child	Do you have children	1=Yes, 2=No	9-A
Howchild	How many children	# Of children	9-B
ImDivWo	Image Divorced Woman	Qualitative answer	10
ImaSelf	If Divorced, describe	Qualitative Answer	11

	self-image		
ImaDivMen	Image of Divorced men	Qualitative answer	12
SocDivWo	Society perceives Divorced Woman	Qualitative answer	13
NegComm	Heard Negative Comments about Divorced Women	Qualitative answer	14
SocDisc	Society Discriminate against divorced woman	1=Yes, 2=No	15-A
Examp	Example of Discrimination	Qualitative Answer	15-B
Group	Different group in Society	1=Yes, 2=No	16-A
GroupWhy	Why?	Qualitative answer	16-B
PersDev	Divorce affects personal development	1=Yes, 2=No	17-A
How	How?	Qualitative Answer	17-B
Endure	Women should endure abuse before divorce	1=Yes, 2=No	18-A
WhyEnd	Why?	Qualitative Answer	18-B
OldConcp	Old and mistaken concepts about divorces women	1=Yes, 2=No	19-A
Specify	Specify	Qualitative answer	19-B
AffDiv	How divorced affected you?	Multiple variables, depending on personal experiences	20
Program	Know programs to help divorced women	1=Yes, 2=No	21-A
Use	Would you use these programs?	1=Yes, 2=No	21-B
WhyUse	Why?	Qualitative Answer	21-C
Addtn	Additional Comments	Qualitative answer	22

APPENDIX B

Survey: (English Translation)

1. Initials or nickname \_\_\_\_\_ (Do not write your real name)
2. Age: \_\_\_\_\_
3. Citizenship: \_\_\_\_\_
4. Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_
5. Level of Education: \_\_\_\_\_
6. Approx. Monthly Income (optional) \_\_\_\_\_ 6-B \_ Pesos \_ Dollars
- 7-A. Current Marital status \_ Married \_ Divorced \_ Separated \_ Single
- 7-B. If you are divorced or separated, for how long? \_\_\_\_\_
- 8-A. If you are NOT divorced, do you know a divorced woman? \_ Yes \_ No
- 8-B. Relationship with the divorced woman: \_ Mother \_ Grandmother \_ Aunt \_ Cousin  
\_ Sister in Law \_ Other (specify) \_\_\_\_\_
- 9-A. Do you have children? \_\_ Yes \_\_ No      9-B. How many? \_\_\_\_\_
10. What image do you have of the divorced women? Please describe...  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. If you are divorced, how do you perceive yourself?  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. What image do you have of divorced men?  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. In your opinion, how does society in general perceive divorced women?  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. Have you ever heard negative comments about divorced women? Please specify...  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 15-A. Do you think today's society discriminates against or treats differently divorced women? \_ Yes \_ No

15-B. If your answer is yes, please give examples:

---

16-A. Do you think divorced women constitute a different group that deserves a special consideration from society?

Yes  No

16-B. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

17-A. Do you think that a divorce affects the personal development of the woman in terms of work, children's education and socio-cultural activities?

Yes  No

17-B. How? \_\_\_\_\_

18-A. Do you agree that women should endure difficult and humiliating circumstances like infidelity before opting for a divorce?

Yes  No

18-B. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

19-A. Do you think that your country and culture have old and mistaken concepts about divorced women?

Yes  No

19-B. Please specify \_\_\_\_\_

20. If you're divorced, how has the divorce affected you personally? Choose all the answers that apply.

-It completely ruined my life

-It's the best thing that ever happened

-I lost faith in marriage

-It's the biggest failure as woman

- I've never felt so lonely

- Society looks down on me

-Other \_\_\_\_\_

-It was a bad experience, but I survived

- It changed my self-esteem

- My life after divorce is more positive

- My children blame me

- I changed my sexual orientation

- My priorities changed radically

21-A. Do you know if your society has programs to help divorced women?

Yes  No

21-B. Would you attend those programs?  Yes  No

21-C. Why? \_\_\_\_\_

22. Additional comments: \_\_\_\_\_