

8-18-2010

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Recommended Citation

Ottaway, Amber (2010) "The Impact of Parental Divorce on the Intimate Relationships of Adult Offspring: A Review of the Literature," *Graduate Journal of Counseling Psychology*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/gjcp/vol2/iss1/5>

The Impact of Parental Divorce on the Intimate Relationships of Adult Offspring: A Review of the Literature

Amber J. Ottaway

Abstract: This literature review provides a comprehensive overview on the impact of parental divorce on the intimate relationships of adult offspring. In this review, the effects of parental divorce on adults' relationships are associated with factors, as outlined in Christensen and Brooks (2001), which have been found to impact the attitudes toward intimacy and marriage of adult children of divorce (ACD). The factors discussed include: age of individual at time of divorce, gender, family conflict, and trust. For each factor, with the exception of family conflict, the research findings present contradictory findings on the effects of parental divorce. The lack of research on this topic does not help alleviate those inconsistencies. Therefore, the author concludes that more research needs to be conducted in this area, in addition to modifying prevailing research methods that seem to exacerbate the mixed findings.

Over the past three decades, the United States has experienced a sharp increase in the number of marriages ending in divorce (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). The National Center for Health Statistics reports that one out of two marriages end in divorce (Wendel, 1997). The rise in occurrence of the dissolution of marriage has resulted in the seemingly commonplace nature of the post-divorce lifestyle. Within that lifestyle, parents and children (depending on the age of the children at the time of divorce) are affected in different ways and thereby handle the divorce differently. Researchers have extensively reviewed the effects of divorce on children (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Kurdex & Berg, 1983; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; as cited in Christensen & Brooks, 2001). However, the long-term effects of divorce on adults have received little attention by researchers (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman, & Roberts, 1990).

One specific area of study that seeks to concentrate on the long-term effects of divorce on adults addresses the impact of parental divorce on the intimate relationships of adult offspring.

In that domain of study, one notion is that as adults, children of divorce are more likely to experience issues with emotional intimacy and are more likely to see their own marriages end in divorce than are children whose parents stayed married (Feng, Giarrusso, Bengston, & Frye, 1999). The thought that divorce could become more prevalent because it is somehow passed down through the generations could lead to additional implications for our society and American families. If individuals were knowledgeable about the impact of parental divorce on the intimate relationships of adult offspring, then appropriate interventions could be created and employed to either prevent or alleviate some of the difficulties associated with experiencing divorce as a young person. The first factor that will be discussed is age and how it may be used as a predictor for how children deal with their parents' divorce and how that affects their future intimate relationships (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

Attitudes Toward Intimacy and Marriage

Age of Individual at Time of Divorce

Oderberg (1986) found that the younger the individual was at the time of the divorce, the more problems that person had with future intimate relationships. He believed this difficulty may be attributed to a child's inability to understand and deal with the divorce of his or her parents at a young age. Oderberg also stated that younger children are more likely to experience a lack of social support outside of the family that



may help them through the difficult process of divorce; thus, they will have more difficulty dealing with it. In support of this finding, Hetherington et al.'s study (as cited in Christensen & Brooks, 2001) also indicated that younger children suffer more severe long-term effects of divorce. In contrast, based on a ten year follow-up study investigating children from divorced families, Wallerstein (1984) stated that younger children suffer less long-term trauma associated with divorce because they remember less of the divorce. Additional research points to individuals' developmental stages at the time of divorce and how that relates to the way they behave in intimate relationships.

After having already experienced the breakup of their parents, adolescents may find it difficult to become intimate in relationships and believe that they are capable of being stable and faithful (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). In addition, researchers have found that young adults from divorced families typically portray an accelerated courtship pattern and experience more interest in relationships. In fact, ACD have been found to marry at an earlier age, especially when both spouses are from divorced families (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). Amato (1996) argued that the eagerness to marry at an early age may be due to the emotional needs of adults from divorced families. Due to these needs, ACD may seek intimacy and committed relationships with the hope that such relationships will fulfill their needs for affection (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). In general, people who have experienced parental divorce are more likely to be involved in some form of intimate relationship, whether it is casual or serious (Hepworth & Ryder, 1984). Another explanation given for increased

interest and engagement in relationships is that children of divorce may convey their insecurity about being in a relationship by initiating physical intimacy with another person (Hetherington, 1993). In fact, Wollfinger's study (as cited in Berk, 2007) showed that young people who experience parental divorce (especially more than one time) have higher rates of early sexual activity and adolescent parenthood. Other researchers state that the length of time since the divorce is a strong predictor of how ACD act within intimate relationships (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

Gabardi and Rosen (1992) found that the more years that had passed since the divorce led to a greater risk that ACD would form unrealistic beliefs about relationships. The researchers expanded on this by stating that parental divorce seems to lead to the formation of unrealistic beliefs regarding the meaning of disagreements in relationships. More specifically, adolescents and adults who experienced their parents' divorce several years earlier were reported as often interpreting disagreements as experiences that were likely to lead to the end of a relationship. Similarly, many of these individuals believed that they needed multiple partners or the one "perfect" partner to be satisfied. However, further research has shown that individuals whose parents have been divorced for longer periods of time reported more trust and altruism in their current romantic relationships. This finding proposes the idea that parents who choose to divorce when their children are older may actually be making their offspring's intimate relationships more difficult by affecting their ability to trust and act selflessly (Sprague & Kinney, 1997).



Due to the varied findings within the research, it is apparent that there is not a consensus on the specific effect that a child's age at the onset of divorce has on his or her behavior within intimate relationships. Unfortunately, the overall lack of research on the long-term effects of parental divorce does not help alleviate the contradictions within the findings. One possible type of research on this topic may explain why there are inconsistencies within the findings. A multitude of research conducted on this topic has generally included self-report inventories given to college students, which assessed their experiences with parental divorce and their level of satisfaction within current and/or past intimate relationships. Therefore, those students who have experienced parental divorce before attending college limits the full exploration of age at time of parental divorce and its possible effects on how individuals behave in their relationships. Furthermore, the fact that a fair amount of the research has been conducted on college students may portray a bias in the research, which does not allow for the generalization of the findings. Despite the overall lack of research on this topic, the findings do seem to portray that age is only a factor and not the exclusive variable that predicts how an individual's intimate relationships will be affected by parental divorce. Another factor that researchers believe is a predictor for how children of divorce experience the nature of intimate relationships is gender (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

Gender of Offspring

Parental divorce has been found to be associated with greater relationship conflict for adult female children of divorce (Aro & Palosaari,

1992). Women are more likely to lose contact with their fathers after a divorce, which leads them to form insecure attachments in their intimate relationships (Amato & Booth, 1994). The increased insecurity may then lead women to seek out intimate relationships, yet fear abandonment as well. In fact, men from divorced families are less likely to engage in emotional intimacy and are more likely to exhibit distancing behaviors (Amato, 1996). Keith and Finlay's study (as cited in Mullett & Stolbert, 2002) found that men from divorced families are also less likely than females to marry. Researchers have also looked at gender differences in levels of intimacy and its potential predictor of divorce. Within intimate relationships, women are likely to respond to their feelings of insecurity by demanding more from their partner, whereas men are likely to respond by avoiding intimacy. These differences in the levels of intimacy may lead to "demand-withdrawal communication patterns, and create a cycle leading to a cascade toward divorce" (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002, p. 42).

Other researchers have found that divorce leads to an increase in the number of sexual partners for women, but not for men (Kinniard & Gerrard, 1986; Sorosky, 1977). In contrast, Gabardi and Rosen (1991) discovered that divorce led to an increase in the number of sexual partners for both men and women. For females, a good father-child relationship has been found to protect against early sexual activity and unhappy romantic attachments. For boys, a good father-child relationship seems to positively affect overall psychological well-being (Clarke-Stewart & Hayward, 1996; McLanahan, 1999; as cited in Berk, 2007).



Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989), on the other hand, attributed gender differences to developmental issues as opposed to divorce. They discovered that males showed more signs of divorce related trauma in childhood and adolescence, whereas females showed more signs in adulthood. In general, researchers have found that female ACD may have more difficulty with intimate relationships than males. That finding is not surprising if women are in fact showing more signs of trauma in adulthood, which is the time when intimate relationships are taking place.

In terms of gender differences and attitudes toward divorce, Black and Sprenkle's study (as cited in Sprague & Kinney, 1997) found that females from divorced families had slightly more positive attitudes toward divorce than females from intact families, but males from divorced families had far more accepting attitudes toward divorce than did the other groups of respondents. Another factor related to how ACD act within their own intimate relationships is the experiencing of family conflict (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).

Family Conflict

Westervelt and Vandenberg (1997) conducted a study with 91 male and 133 female undergraduate students that assessed the young adult's capacities for intimacy. Of the 224 participants, 111 were from intact families and 113 were from divorced families. The researchers found that parental marital status was not significantly associated with problems with intimacy but that conflict in parental relationships accounted for difficulties with intimacy. In fact, a majority of the issues that ACD were facing were directly

related to family conflict. In explanation of their findings, Westervelt and Vandenberg stated that children from divorced families learn poor conflict management skills and dysfunctional behavior from their parents. In turn, they create similar environments by engaging in behavior that they learned while growing up in families with severe conflict.

More recently, a study conducted by Conger, Cui, Bryant, and Elder (2000), using observational data from 193 families, found that behavior between parents in 1989 to 1992 (when offspring were young adolescents) predicted offspring's interpersonal behavior with romantic partners in 1997 (when offspring were young adults). When parents were warm and supportive with one another, offspring acted warm and supportive toward their romantic partners. The offspring behaviors were then linked with greater relationship satisfaction in their intimate relationships.

Another study, conducted by Gabardi and Rosen (1991) also found parental conflict to be a predictor of intimacy problems and attitudes toward marriage for ACD. They posited that parents' intimate relationships may determine how young adults resolve their own personal issues with intimacy and marriage. Grych and Flynn's study (as cited in Mullett & Stolberg, 2002), also agreed with this position by asserting that parental divorce often exposes children to models of maladaptive communication and conflict management skills. Therefore, children whose parents divorced may not have had good role models for conflict resolution and problem solving skills (Amato, 1996). Another factor that relates to the behavior of ACD within intimate relationships is their level of trust (Christensen & Brooks, 2001).



Trust

Johnston and Thomas (1996) explored trust and family conflict as factors affecting ACD. Participants were separated into two groups: young adults whose parents had divorced and those whose parents were still married with low-conflict marriages. None of the participants were married and all of them were involved in monogamous heterosexual relationships for at least three months. The researchers discovered that ACD had a lack of trust when it came to intimate relationships and marriage. Their lack of trust may be associated with the witnessing of failed relationships and marriages, which can lead to the belief that committed relationships are risky. Another possible explanation for the lack of trust exhibited by ACD is the disturbance of parent-child ties (King, 2002). Due to the lack of trust in relationships that adult children of divorce experience, many of them decide to cohabitate with a significant other without the intention of marriage. Another study further illustrated the intentions of ACD to engage in cohabitation, which was related to their negative views on marriage.

Tasker (1992) conducted a study with 331 Cambridge, United Kingdom teenagers who were both from intact and divorced families. He found that participants from divorced families preferred cohabitation to marriage. Furthermore, the ACD were more likely to say that they did not want to marry in the future than their counterparts from intact homes. Tasker also discovered that although children of divorce had more negative views of marriage, they were more likely to put themselves in situations that promoted the lifestyle of marriage. Such situations included leaving school, leaving home, and being in monogamous intimate relationships.

Although ACD have been found to put themselves in situations that resemble marriage, they tend to view divorce as an exit strategy if marriage is entered into.

Duran-Aydintug (1997) found that ACD often enter into committed relationships with the belief that they can easily exit if they are not happy with the relationship. The high rates of cohabitation, positive attitudes toward divorce, and high divorce rates among ACD reveal that finding. In addition, Johnston and Thomas (1996) found that they commonly believe that marriage does not last a lifetime and that divorce is a logical way to escape from a bad relationship. The researchers then concluded that they are more likely to rely on divorce as an option rather than working on their relationship problems. Although some researchers have found that ACD are less likely to get married and work on the marriage if troubles arise, one must wonder whether those results are a fair and accurate portrayal of the entire range of their behaviors within intimate relationships.

It seems as if researchers may only be seeking out and assessing the negative consequences of divorce and how they relate to the underlying assumption that children of divorce are passive subjects in their parents' split and will not be able to sustain future intimate relationships. It is apparent that there are individuals who were greatly affected by their parents' divorce, but a large majority of the research seems to come from the standpoint that children of divorce are damaged in some way, and now their issues need to be identified and assessed. Therefore, one suggestion to researchers is to explore the consequences of divorce that lead to positive and healthy behavior in the intimate relationships of ACD.



Conclusion

Due to the lack of research on the long-term effects of parental divorce on adult offspring, it is necessary that researchers take strides to explore those effects. One area that they attempt to do that in is through the assessment of the intimate relationships of ACD. Although that is an interesting subject to study, the style of research that predominates seems to exacerbate the contradictions in the findings. For example, the majority of that research is done on undergraduate college students who have already experienced their parents' divorce. Therefore, that does not allow researchers to investigate the long-term effects of divorce on individuals who may have experienced that as middle and late adults.

One interesting topic that researchers could explore would be how remaining in a marriage for the sake of the children affected the future intimate relationships of those offspring. One final suggestion for researchers is to conduct follow up studies on the effects of parental divorce on the intimate relationships of ACD. The large majority of research performed on that subject came from the late seventies to the mid nineties; therefore, a new look at the findings from the past, in addition to a modified research methodology could bring about new insights into the effects of divorce on the intimate relationships of all adults and not just young adults.

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