

Chapter 13.

Stress and Coping in Divorce: Children and Developmental Trajectories

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Significant numbers of U.S. children see their parents' marriage end in divorce. Estimates range from 30 percent to 50 percent. The divorce rate for remarried couples (49%) is comparable to the estimate for first-marriage divorce rates (47%), thus exposing many children to the stress of a second or third parental divorce (Crosbie-Burnett, 1994). Clinical research and retrospective reports repeatedly implicate divorce as a turning point in the life of a family and its individual members (Clausen, 1990). As the "divorce revolution" (Council on Families in America, 1995) subsides, transforms, or shifts direction, reviews by key scholars permit a state-of-the-art account of the effects of divorce on children (Cherlin et al., 1991; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Hetherington & Cingempeel, 1992). Both salutary and harmful effects are documented (Amato, 1993; Barber & Eccles, 1992; Zill, Morrison & Coiro, 1993), with a complex web of protective and risk factors reported to shape their form and duration. Economic deprivation is one of the 3 major psychosocial mechanisms identified, a growing literature explores the role of biological factors, and there is increasing evidence that the effects of earlier stressor events are exacerbated by later developmental tasks. This chapter draws from a complex multidisciplinary literature on children of divorce to make us aware of issues and problems that require the attention of researchers, practitioners and policy makers, while illustrating the use of a developmental approach to enrich stress process theory and its applications. .

Effects of Divorce

A now-classic review by Bloom, Asher, and White (1978) documented the increased morbidity and mortality associated with separation and divorce. The children of these disrupted marriages are truly at risk (Wertlieb, 1996). More recently, this finding was reinforced in a follow-up of “the Termites”-- participants in the Terman Life-Cycle study of over 1,000 gifted children, studied since their preadolescence in 1921 (Friedman, et al., 1995). In an archival, prospective cohort design, using hazard regression analysis (survival analysis) to predict longevity, Friedman and colleagues found that the children whose parents divorced faced a one-third greater mortality risk than those with parents who remained married until the child was 21 years old. Death of a parent had little effect. “...Our analysis suggested that parental divorce was the key early social predictor of premature mortality throughout the life span.” (p. 71). Duly noted by Friedman and colleagues, and consonant with the bioecological and life-course perspectives emerging in developmental science, the stress-and-coping processes now experienced by children likely differ from those of the “Termites,” but the health consequences of divorce are a continuing concern.

Although salutary effects of divorce for children have been observed (e.g. Barber & Eccles, 1992), by and large there is little doubt that parental divorce puts children at risk for behavioral and health problems well after the divorce has taken place. In their national survey of over 1,200 people, 152 of whom experienced the divorce of their parents before the age of 18 years, Amato and Booth (1991) found a range of outcomes and group differences. Those who experienced divorce showed lower levels of well being than those who grew up in continuously intact, happy families. Those who grew up in intact, unhappy homes also had reduced well being. If parental divorce was not associated with a decline in the quality of the relationship with parents and if a subsequent divorce was not encountered (a kind of “low-stress” divorce trajectory), the adult well being matched that of the non-divorced group and surpassed that of the intact, unhappy group.

In terms of group data on children whose parents divorce, negative effects are evident but do not show for all children. The overall effect sizes are statistically significant but relatively small, anywhere from .08 to .23 (Emery & Forehand, 1994). However, the emergence or reemergence of negative effects in adolescence or adulthood seems quite evident in the data from the current or recent adult populations (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Kiernan, 1992; Zill et al., 1993).

These effect sizes indicate that although divorce poses a general risk, its effects are not uniform. Instead, the life-course trajectories of children of divorce are diverse, influenced by many factors, including those depicted as elements of our stress-and-coping paradigm (Amato, 1993, 1994; Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Hetherington and Cingempeel, 1992; Sandler, Tein, & West, 1994; Wertlieb, 1991). Moreover, the changing contexts, prevalence, and meaning of divorce are likely to influence its impact on future generations.

Thus, an emergent consensus sees divorce as a marker for a period of upheaval, distress, and decline in well being for most children. Preceding-, during-, and up to three years after- the marital dissolution, most children exhibit and experience a range of symptoms, psychosocial problems, and challenges. A complex web of protective and risk factors shapes the form and longevity of these difficulties, including individual factors (such as gender, age, race, temperament, attitudes, and coping style), family factors (such as supportive parent-child relations, siblings, interparental conflict both before and after, quality and quantity of contact with the noncustodial parent, parenting styles, and economic decline), and extrafamilial or community support factors (such as contact with adult caretakers, social support, and group therapy) (Emery & Forehand, 1994).

Wheaton (1990) has demonstrated in a Canadian national survey some dimensions of the relief from chronic stress that can result from a stressful transition such as divorce, at least for the former marital partners. Though there are certainly instances where divorce produces a period of relief or happiness-- especially in cases of emotional or physical abuse, severe parental psychopathology, or substance abuse-- its immediate effect on most children is likely to be negative.

When considering the longer-term aftermath of divorce, there is less consensus than that surrounding short-term consequences. Amato and Keith (1991a) in a meta-analysis of 37 studies conducted between 1952 and 1991 involving over 81,000 people conclude that “the long-term consequences of parental divorce for adult attainment and quality-of-life may prove to be more serious than the short-term emotional and social problems in children” (p. 40). Furstenberg and Teitler (1994), documenting the selective occurrence of divorce along with the well-documented destructive processes in both divorcing and non-divorcing problem marriages, suggest that this assessment could be premature. Certainly, the same dynamic web of risk and protective factors noted earlier influences the longer-term outcomes, although recent reviews acknowledge the considerable methodological and theoretical limitations under which data are generated as we pursue the question of the health consequences of divorce for children and as we map the long-term trajectories of their multiple, alternative developmental pathways.

Mediating Mechanisms

What mechanisms create and sustain the effects of parental divorce on children?

Amato and Booth (1991) partially supported 3 conceptual models:

...a *socialization model* emphasizing dysfunctional learning experiences ...as well as impaired parental attention and supervision; an *economic deprivation model* capturing the frequent decline in socioeconomic status and resources; and a *family stress model* that includes consideration of the variety of traumatic or challenging events and experiences faced by a child as parents divorce-- conflict, moving residences, loss of contact with immediate and extended family members, remarriage, etc.

Subsequent attention has focused on two particularly controversial concepts central to the question. Some researchers have proposed a “sleeper effect,” suggesting that such challenges as adolescence, adulthood, single-parent family life, or parental remarriage (or re-divorce) may trigger a delayed effect of parental divorce. Other researchers have centered on “intergenerational transmission” of divorce to portray some crucial dimensions of how lives are affected by parental divorce. .

Sleeper Effects

In their high-profile longitudinal clinical investigation of 60 families adjusting to divorce, Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) describe a “sleeper effect.” They found that more than half of the adolescent girls considered to be coping well at the time of their parents’ divorce exhibited a clinically significant, even “dangerous” decline in adjustment in early adulthood, at the ten-year follow-up. A few boys showed a similar pattern. With an implicit stress-and-coping framework, they map a set of life course trajectories in this way:

The cumulative effect of [their parents’] failing marriage and divorce rose to a crescendo as each child entered young adulthood. It was here, as these young men and women faced the developmental tasks of establishing love and intimacy that they most felt the lack of a template for a loving, enduring, and moral relationship between a man and a woman. It was here that anxiety carried over from the divorced family relationships threatened to bar the young people’s ability to create new, enduring families of their own. (pp. 299–300)

They further stated that a “significant number of young women are living with an intolerable anxiety about betrayal” (p. 62). Another study, considered more rigorous than the Wallerstein study, is the Kauai (Hawaii) Longitudinal Study that followed an entire 1955 birth cohort of 505 children through adulthood (Werner & Smith, 1992). Those individuals who experienced the dissolution of their own marriages by the follow-up at age 32 had a “vulnerability” most potently defined by having experienced a parental divorce or remarriage in childhood. Werner and Smith do not commit themselves to a “sleeper effect” explanation, but they profess to share a common concern with Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) . . .

[who] find in a clinical sample what we find in an entire birth cohort: The psychological effects of parental divorce extend into adulthood and can interfere with the establishment of a strong bond of commitment and intimacy for a significant minority of men and women. Because parental divorce is currently the most prevalent risk factor for children in our society, its long-term consequences for the children need more attention. (p. 198)

In the National Survey of Children, Zill et. al (1993) document a “marginally reliable” longitudinal gender interaction effect as a “sleeper effect,” whereby young women whose parents had divorced were more apt to have problematic relationships with their mothers, despite having had positive relations in adolescence. The Zill et al. study is not cited by Dunlop and Burns (1995) in the paper where they report that their ten-year longitudinal analysis found “no convincing support” for a sleeper effect (p. 375). The notion of a sleeper effect remains a challenge for those seeking to map the life-course trajectories of children whose parents divorce. However, a “delayed reaction” description does capture the experience of many individuals who describe their parents’ divorce, suggesting that the effects of earlier stressor events are exacerbated by later developmental tasks.

Intergenerational Transmission of Divorce

The developmental trajectory reflecting a sleeper effect would portray a period of relative well-being on particular outcomes near the time of parental divorce and a subsequent decline, implicating a “turning point” as a deflector of the curve (Wheaton & Gotlib, 1996). As noted, this pattern is evident for some young people. Notions of the “intergenerational transmission” of divorce suggest a different perspective on the developmental trajectories of children whose parents divorce. Significant numbers of adults who experienced the divorce of their parents go through a divorce themselves. The phrase “intergenerational transmission” evokes both biogenetic and psychosocial hypotheses. The fact that parental divorce early in one’s life course replicates itself in adulthood is substantiated by numerous studies; however, the causal explanations and the associated depictions of trajectories and turning points are far from clear (Belsky & Pinsky, 1988; Keith & Finlay, 1988; Kitson, 1992; McGue & Lykken, 1992; McGue, 1994; White, 1990).

Constitutional factors in divorce.-- The genetics of divorce recently surfaced as a possible explanation. It is a relatively new research domain, but its findings are both robust and replicated, requiring the developmentalist and stress process researcher to consider it along with other conditions in multifactorial models (Reiss, 1995; Wertlieb, 1996). McGue and Lykken (1992) examined the observation that divorce runs in families by comparing 722 monozygotic twin pairs with 794 dizygotic twin pairs in the Minnesota Twin Registry, a traditional study design for behavior genetics. As expected, and consistent with previous literature, over 20 percent of these individuals had been divorced at least once and, as consistent with other estimates of the rate at which divorce runs in families, about 30 percent of the marriages of individuals with a divorced first-degree relative also ended in divorce. A substantially high risk of divorce, 45 percent, was evident when that relative was a monozygotic twin. A calculation using logistic regression weights for parental and twin divorce status yields a 77.5 percent predicted rate in the presence of divorce and a much smaller 5.3 percent rate in the absence of twin and parent divorce. The findings have been replicated (Turkheimer, Lovett, Robinette, & Gottesman, 1992).

Like most behavior genetic findings, the implication is not that parental divorce or other developmental risks are “predestined” by virtue of the significant genetic component.

Any genetic influence on divorce is likely to be highly indirect, mediated by multiple physiological, neurochemical, and behavioral systems” (McGue, 1994, p. 110). Rather than as a trait that will inevitably unfold, this genetic evidence can be considered to specify certain ranges of pre-programmed pathways of change and development. For those who map trajectories for children whose parents divorce, using a stress-and-coping paradigm as a road map, “a behavioral genetic perspective may help explain why the effect of divorce on offspring functioning appears to be manifested prior to parental separation (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986) (an early expression of inherited factors that are associated with divorce in adulthood?), or why only a *small minority* [sic] of children appear to bear any long-term consequence as a result of parental divorce (heterogeneity due to genotype-environment interaction?)” (McGue, 1994, p. 111).

The microscopy of a genetic perspective prompts the telescoping of an evolutionary perspective, an elegant dialectic only recently being considered by family researchers as they embrace developmental and developmental psychopathological frames of reference. Relevant and provocative theory and data are marshaled by journalist Robert Wright (1994b) in his recent book, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*. A dramatic *Time* magazine cover heralded publication of the book with a bold headline: “Infidelity: It may be in our genes,” and a suitable subtitle inside: “Devotion and betrayal, marriage and divorce; How evolution shaped human love” (Wright, 1994a). Drawing heavily from genetics, primatology, anthropology, and sexology, Wright describes evolutionary psychology and crafts a compelling set of scenarios documenting gender differences, courtship and marital behaviors, and other biopsychosocial processes central to analyzing the divorce process, its causes and effects on an individual child or an adult or a society. For instance, he cites work by Daly and Wilson (1988) explaining the negative impact on children of serial monogamy in terms of an “obvious” Darwinian prediction that stepparents will “tend to care less profoundly for children than natural parents.” Given that parental investment is a precious resource and a basic buffer against stress, natural selection would “favor those parental psyches that do not squander it on nonrelatives” (p. 83)-- who, after all, do not carry the parent’s genes. A child is at considerably greater risk for abuse by a parent if living with a stepparent and a biological parent than if living with two biological parents.

This invocation of genetic, evolutionary, or constitutional factors as crucial elements of an explanatory framework is especially compelling in light of the power of the recent “cascade” theory of marital dissolution and stability proposed by Gottman (1993). In this theory, not only do psychophysiological processes measurable in the laboratory predict divorce, but they may also predict responsiveness to an explicit, cost-effective form of psychotherapy, minimal marital therapy. Data on children or life-span data are yet to be presented.

The psychosocial framework for divorce.-- Acknowledging the influence of heritability and evolution and integrating the more distal elements of sleeper effect hypotheses, a psychosocial framework for the intergenerational transmission of divorce has empirical support across several domains of theory and data. Again, we have available a well-executed meta-analysis alluded to earlier (Amato & Keith, 1991a) and subsequent debate (Amato, 1993; Demo, 1993; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994; Kurdek, 1993) implicating a variety of social psychological processes in the increased prevalence of divorce among adults whose own parents divorced. Effect sizes are generally weak, but they appear larger among those with lower educational attainment, earlier entry into marriage, earlier childbearing, lower income, and lower socioeconomic well-being-- all potential experiences, even turning point markers, associated with divorce. Cherlin (1992) cautions us wisely, noting that in a key study (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) low income accounts for about half of the intergenerational effect and that most divorces do not transmit. Nonetheless, if ours is the “divorce generation” by virtue of its statistical profile, then what of the next generation, given the cross-generational transmission of divorce and the increasingly well-documented health consequences?

Certainly we have advanced in our capacity to describe relationships between stressful social conditions and health outcomes, with divorce a compelling example. We can celebrate progress in our “quest for the other 90% of the variance,” emphasized as a framework for stress-and-coping research (e.g., Haggerty et al., 1994; Robins & Rutter, 1990; Rolf, Masten, Cicchetti, Nuechterlein, & Weintraub, 1990). When this field was launched nearly two decades ago, the challenge to explain the complex relationships between early stressors and health and disorder at different phases of the life course was a central concern; Rutter (1981) articulated at least five main avenues for this linkage, alerting us to a range of processes and mechanisms that might be involved.

- First, for many, perhaps most, children, the stressors are disruptive and parental divorce is a marker in mapping their life-course trajectories (Wertlieb, 1991, 1996). Among the mechanisms for the impact of this early experience on adult health or adjustment is the persistence of some psychological or behavioral disorder, recognizing that its form may change and that its maintenance is not necessarily related to the initial cause or provocation. Dysfunction exhibited at the time of the divorce continues into the future.
- Second, an early experience, such as the divorce of one's parents, might also be associated with bodily changes that influence later functioning in the health or behavior spheres. Burgeoning data in psychoimmunology implicate neuroendocrine processes in the stress process. Divorce researchers are beginning to integrate these mechanisms in theory and practice, as noted above (e.g., Gottman, 1993).
- A third mechanism hypothesized by Rutter (1981) was that "early events may lead directly to altered patterns of behavior which, although changed at the time of the event, take the form of an overt disorder only some years later" (p. 347). At that time, Rutter could point to no well-established example of this mechanism. Recent work on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and on the effects of sexual abuse now provides good examples. Where PTSD or sexual abuse might be elements of the experience of some children when parents divorce, this mechanism may be a part of the process in limited ways, or perhaps more generally.

- The fourth and fifth avenues linking early experience with adult disorder are increasingly obvious when mapping developmental trajectories for children coping with parental divorce. Divorce involves changed family conditions that may predispose a child to later disorder. A divorce might be only one link in a continuing “chain of psychosocial adversities” (p. 347). This chain includes conditions and events prior to the divorce, as well as after. Earlier, we noted how poverty or impoverishment associated with divorce may be a key element in the bioecological context. If economic strains were elements of a causal chain leading to divorce, that such strains can continue or worsen might be considered in articulating this process.

Among the most complex processes implied in the present effort to link early experience with health outcomes are those documenting or speculating how early events alter sensitivity to stress or modify styles of coping. The impact of such changes may not be observable until subsequent contexts, exposures, or challenges provoke or evoke the relevant behavior. As noted in the earlier discussion of sleeper effects, a girl’s anxieties about relationships engendered by her parents’ divorce may only surface years later, as she contemplates entering her own marriage. A parent’s management of family conflict or divorce may shape the attitudes or skills a child will deploy when establishing a family later in life. Documenting and explaining the processes involved in these emerging anxieties or coping styles are key tasks in ongoing research.

Intervention Strategies

As a case example, the effects of divorce on children are a specific illustration of the general urgency and challenge of the basic research agenda in relating social stressors to resources and health consequences. The need to design, implement, and evaluate interventions is just as urgent and challenging. An emphasis on prevention is likely to be most effective in the long run, since the cross-fertilization between basic research and intervention is a hallmark of applied developmental science. This arena of divorce research is explored in several sources (Alpert-Gillis, Pedro-Carroll, & Cowen, 1989; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Gottman, 1993; Wertlieb, 1991, 1996). Scientific treatises (e.g., McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995) and white papers issued by such bodies as the Institute for American Values (Council on Families, 1995) and nonpartisan, nonprofit research organizations (e.g., Zill, 1995) provide a rich and varied menu of policy recommendations.

Stress and coping interventions. Returning to the general stress-and-coping framework, with its bioecological and life-course contexts, interventions on behalf of children and families aimed at limiting or preventing negative health outcomes are in order. The framework allows for targeting interventions in coherent and cost-effective ways (Kazdin, 1992). Specific examples, as well as conceptual and heuristic presentations of this approach, are increasingly evident in the literature (e.g., Aldwin, 1994; Brooks-Gunn, 1995; Kendall, Lerner, & Craighead, 1984; Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995; Sorenson, 1993; Winett, 1995)

The updated and elaborated stress-and-coping perspective provides a more realistic portrayal of the complexity of the divorce experience, the diverse set of stressors associated with divorce, and the range of alternative developmental pathways or trajectories it can create (Brody, Neubaum, & Forehand, 1988; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Wertlieb, 1991). Each of the cutting-edge themes enumerated by Haggerty et al. (1994)-- co-occurrence, inter-individual variation, intra-individual variation, cohort differences, linkage of diverse multiple stressors and diverse multiple outcomes and the processes and mechanisms that effect this linkage, as well as the potential for prevention and intervention-- becomes manifest when considering the effects of divorce on children's outcomes. Most simply put, health policy and services, whether preventive or ameliorative, should aim to achieve the following:

- Reduce or alter the social stressors linked to health and illness.
- Enhance the coping processes of children and families.
- Build and strengthen the resources and protective factors demonstrated to influence stress-health processes.
- Limit or reduce risk factors implicated in these processes.

Consistent with this orientation is Winett's (1995) compelling generic framework for health promotion and disease prevention linked to Healthy People 2000. Its "developmental-ecological perspective" coincides with the stress-and-coping framework articulated in this chapter and places it in contemporary public health missions:

Developmental interventions. A developmental perspective suggests still other means of segmenting populations to better position, target, and distribute interventions, such as considering the cognitive social abilities of children, planning product offerings to fit needs at important milestones (e.g., move to a new school, the birth of a child, or retirement), and assessing how products can be redesigned and offered at appropriate times and settings for people at different developmental points. A developmental perspective also involves a careful examination of how settings can be modified through the consideration of public health measures and through ecological theory to benefit particular population segments.

The stress process, with its significant health consequences, is best understood in a developmental context. This perspective provides an opportunity for more complex mapping of various alternative developmental pathways informed by a set of concepts basic to the life-course paradigm--notions of developmental transitions, trajectories, and turning points. (Cicchetti, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994; Clausen, 1995; Elder, 1995) How children adapt (or fail to adapt) to the stressful circumstances of parental divorce, the proliferation of stressors associated with this "historical" or "pivotal" event in their lives, the orchestration of resources and moderators that shape the turning points or trajectories, and the range of "biopsychosocial" health outcomes are all the concern of researchers, service providers, and policymakers involved with stress and its health consequences. The stress-and-coping paradigm illustrated in the specific case of the effects of divorce on children suggests an agenda for continued basic research, as well as for research aimed at improving the health and well being of America's children.

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