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## **CHAPTER 6**

### **DIVORCE RESEARCH: LESSONS FOR FAMILY THERAPISTS**

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

A synthesis of findings from the international literature on psychological aspects of divorce is presented in this paper. First, the prevalence of divorce is described. Reasons given by men and women for pursuing divorce are then outlined. This is followed by a discussion of the demographic correlates of divorce and the impact of divorce on parental well-being. Factors that mediate parental adjustment to divorce are then considered and the immediate impact of divorce on parenting is outlined. The short-, medium -, and long-term effects of divorce on children and the important personal and contextual factors that mediate these effects are then described. In the final sections of the paper, stepfamilies, children's adjustment to remarriage and the impact of mediation and post divorce counselling services are considered along with research and service development priorities.

Because of the enormity of the literature on which this article is based, each of the assertions below could be substantiated with multiple references. However, this would detract from the paper's readability. To avoid such difficulties, in each section, only references to one or two major review papers or key studies are given. These references have been selected for their comprehensiveness and the balanced overview they give of the literature.

### **DIVORCE & REMARRIAGE RATES**

Divorce is no longer considered to be an aberration in the normal family lifecycle, but a normative transition for a substantial minority of families (Bray & Heatherington, 1993; Brody, Neubaum & Forehand, 1988). In the US & the UK between a quarter and a third of marriages end in divorce. About two thirds of these involve children. Nine out of ten cases culminate in the child living with the mother. About three quarters of divorced men and women remarry.

About two out of three remarriages end in divorce. In Ireland in the 1991 census only 3.5% (or 55,143 out of 1,572,275) of those who were ever married declared that they were separated, deserted or from an annulled marriage.

### **REASONS FOR DIVORCE**

Difficulties with communication and the power balance or role structure of the marriage are the two major reasons given in major US surveys for divorce (Kitson & Sussman, 1982). Both men and women identify lack of communication and understanding on the part of their partner as the main reason for divorce. Disagreement over roles and power relationships is the second most common reason for divorce. Men complain of their wives being too authoritarian and too ready to engage in nagging and fault finding. Women identify the constraints that the marriage places of them fulfilling their needs for personal autonomy and independence as second major reason for divorce. Other prominent reasons for divorce are infidelity, immaturity, alcohol abuse and lack of sexual satisfaction. With sex, women complain about the quality and men, about the quantity.

Observational studies (e.g. Gottman, 1993) of distressed couples who subsequently separate show that they gradually engage in more negative interactions than positive interactions. This escalation of a negative interactional

style includes four linked behaviours: criticism, contempt, defensiveness and stonewalling. As the ratio of negative to positive interaction increases, both partners attend selectively to their spouses' negative behaviours while ignoring positive behaviours. Partners in distressed marriages also consistently attribute global, stable negative intentions to their spouses for negative or ambiguous behaviour but attribute their spouses' positive behaviour to situational factors. This negative cognitive style coupled with the increase in negative interactions lead to growing feelings for both partners of hurt or fear on the one hand and anger on the other. Both of these emotional states exacerbate the negative interaction patterns and negative cognitive styles. As these negative cognitive, emotional and interactional process become stronger, members of the couple perceive the marital problems as more severe and engage in more solitary rather than shared problem solving. At this stage partners become isolated from each other and begin to live parallel lives. Eventually, usually following some critical incident, the whole history of the marriage is reconstrued in a negative way by which gives a rationale for the decision to divorce.

Men and women differ in their stress responses to the process of separation and divorce (Bray & Heatherington, 1993). Women are unhappy in their marriages for longer than men. Economic difficulties are a primary reason for women not divorcing while men give primacy to the fear of separation from their children. Women's most stressful period is that just before the divorce. For men it is the period which follows the divorce that is most stressful. This is evidenced by the low level at which the immune system functions in women and men during the pre and post divorce periods respectively. Immune system functioning improves as attachment to the ex-spouse decreases.

## **CORRELATES OF DIVORCE**

Socio-economic status, urban/rural geographical location, age at marriage, premarital pregnancy and parental divorce have all been associated with divorce (Raschke, 1987). Divorce is more common among those from lower socio-economic groups, who live in urban areas, who have married before the age of 20, where premarital pregnancy has occurred and where parental divorce has occurred. Divorce is less common among those from higher socio-economic groupings, who live in rural areas, who have married after the age of 30, where premarital pregnancy has not occurred and where the couples parents are still in their first marriage. The economic resources associated with high SES, the community integration associated with rural living, the psychological resources associated with maturity and the model of marital stability offered by non-divorced parents are the more common explanations given for the associations among the factors associated with divorce mentioned in this section. It is important to note that the relationship between these various factors and divorce while consistent, are moderate to weak. That is, there are significant subgroups of people who show some or all of these risk factors but, do not divorce.

### **EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON PARENTS**

Divorce leads to multiple life changes which affect parental well-being and the impact of these changes on parental well-being is mediated by a range of personal and contextual factors which are described below (Raschke, 1987; Bray & Heatherington, 1993).

#### **Life changes**

Divorce leads custodial parents to experience major changes in the their lives including a change in residential arrangements, economic disadvantage,

loneliness associated with social network changes, and role strain associated with the task overload that results from having to care for children and work outside the home. Non-custodial parents experience all of these changes with the exception of role strain. For custodial fathers, role strain and task overload are less extreme than for women for two reasons. First, members of men's networks are more likely to see them as incompetent home-makers and so offer help with cooking and cleaning. Second, men are more economically advantaged and so are better able to afford child minders or domestic help. Also, the impact of economic disadvantage is less for divorced men than women. In US surveys, non-custodial fathers have been shown to suffer few long-term economic difficulties as a result of divorce. After 3 years their income is only marginally below their pre-divorce income in the majority of cases. Women suffer major economic problems following divorce. About half are below the poverty line during the first 2 years post-divorce and during this period they suffer a 35% drop in income.

### **Health**

Changes in divorced couples residential arrangements, economic status, social networks and role demands lead to a deterioration in physical and mental health for the majority of individuals immediately following separation. However, for most people these health problems abate within two years of the divorce.

### **Mood Swings**

Both men and women suffer extreme emotional lability in the period leading up to separation and for the two year post-separation period. An awareness of the opportunities for a new way of life and escape from the emotional pain of chronic marital discord both lead to periods of elation. The loss of a familiar way of life, the loss of a long-standing partner and a fear that alone one may not meet the

extraordinary challenges that go with being a single person or a single parent commonly are associated with episodes of depressed mood.

### **Identity Problems**

For women in particular, separation is associated with a crisis of identity. Prior to separation many women define themselves in terms of their husbands or their children. Also women may rely on their husbands to develop a social network of friends. After separation, women who have relied on their husbands for self-definition find that they experience confusion about their identity. They have to redefine their self-concept in terms of their own role and develop their own social network. Women who have jobs outside the home experience fewer identity problems in the aftermath of divorce.

### **FACTORS RELATED TO PARENTAL POST-DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT**

The following factors effect parental adjustment to divorce: the way the divorce decision was made, age, length of marriage, income, occupational status, social supports, and personal psychological resources (Amato & Kieth, 1991b). Better adjustment following divorce occurs when individuals are young, have been married for a brief period and have either initiated the divorce or mutually agreed to divorce. A good income and having a job before the divorce occurred leads to good post divorce adjustment, particularly for women. A belief in one's personal effectiveness, high self-esteem and a high tolerance for change are associated with good postdivorce adjustment as are an egalitarian gender-role orientation and diminished attachment to the ex-spouse. Poorer adjustment following divorce occurs when individuals are older, have been married for a long period and have had little input to the decision to divorce. A low income and the absence of a job outside the home before the divorce leads to poor post divorce

adjustment, particularly for women. A sense of personal powerlessness, low self-esteem and a low tolerance for change are associated with postdivorce maladjustment as are an a traditional gender-role orientation and a sustained attachment to the ex-spouse.

### STAGES POST-DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

Family transformation through divorce and remarriage may be conceptualized as process involving a series of stages. One model of the stages of adjustment to divorce is presented in Figure 6.1 (Carr, 1995). Within this model, at each stage certain tasks must be completed, if the next stage is to be successfully negotiated. Failure to complete tasks at one stage, may lead to adjustment problems for family members at later stages.

**Figure 1. Stages of adjustment to divorce and remarriage**

STAGE	TASK
<b>1. Decision to divorce</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting one's own part in marital failure</li> </ul>
<b>2. Planning separation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperatively developing a plan for custody of the children, visitation and finances</li> <li>• Dealing with the families of origin's response to the plan to separate</li> </ul>
<b>3. Separation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mourning the loss of the intact family</li> <li>• Adjusting to the change in parent-child and parent-parent relationships</li> <li>• Avoiding letting marital arguments interfere with parent-to-parent cooperation</li> <li>• Staying connected to the extended family</li> <li>• Managing doubts about separation and becoming committed to divorce</li> </ul>

<b>4. Post-Divorce period</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining flexible arrangements about custody, access and finances</li> <li>• Ensuring both parents retain strong relationships with the children</li> <li>• Reestablishing peer relationships and a social network</li> </ul>
<b>5. Entering a new relationship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing emotional divorce from the previous relationship</li> <li>• Developing commitment to a new marriage</li> </ul>
<b>6. Planning a new marriage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Planning for cooperative co-parental relationships with ex-spouses</li> <li>• Planning to deal with children's loyalty conflicts involving natural and step-parents</li> <li>• Adjust to widening of extended family</li> </ul>
<b>7. Establishing a new family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Realigning relationships within the family to allow space for new members</li> <li>• Sharing memories and histories to allow for integration of all new members</li> </ul>

From Carr, A. (1995) *Positive Practice: A step-by-step guide to Family therapy*. Reading. Harwood Press.

### IMMEDIATE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON PARENTING

The stresses and strains of residential changes, economic hardship, role changes and consequent physical and psychological difficulties associated with the immediate aftermath of separation and divorce may compromise parents capacity to cooperate in meeting their children's needs for supportive relationships with each parent and clear, consistent discipline from both parents (Amato, 1993). Rigid punitive parenting, lax laissez faire parenting and chaotic parenting which incorporates both of these extreme styles are not uncommon among both custodial and non-custodial parents who have divorced. Three distinct co-parenting styles have been identified in studies of divorced families. These are described below and their impact on children's adjustment given (Bray & Heatherington, 1993).

**Co-operative parenting**

Parents here develop a unified and integrated set of rules about managing the children in both households. This is the optimal arrangement but only occurs in about one in five cases.

**Parallel parenting**

Here each parent has his or her own set of rules for the children and no attempt is made to integrate these. Most children show few adjustment problems when parallel parenting occurs. This is the most common pattern.

**Conflictual parenting**

In this situation the couple do not communicate directly with each other. All messages are passed through the child. This leads to major adjustment problems for the child. The go-between role, forced upon the child, is highly stressful (Heatherington, 1989).

**EFFECTS OF DIVORCE ON CHILDREN**

A distinction may be made between the short, medium and long term effects of divorce which are described below( Amato, 1993; Amato & Kieth, 1991a; Amato & Kieth, 1991b, Wallerstein, 1991).

**Short term effects**

For the 2 year period immediately following divorce, most children show some adjustment problems. Boys tend to display conduct problems and girls tend to experience emotional problems.

**Medium term effects**

The impact of divorce on children between the 3rd and 10th year following divorce may be statistically expressed in two ways: (1) as differences between the average or mean level of well-being or maladjustment of children of divorce compared with the mean level of well-being or maladjustment in intact families; (2) as the percentage of children of divorce who show adjustment difficulties.

The mean level of maladjustment has consistently been found to be worse for children of divorce in comparison with those from intact families on a variety of measures of adjustment including conduct difficulties, emotional problems, academic performance, self-esteem and relationships with parents. This has led to the erroneous conclusion by some interpreters of the literature that divorce always has a negative effect on children.

When the impact of divorce on children is expressed in terms of the percentages of maladjusted children, it is clear that divorce leads to maladjustment for only a minority of youngsters. 20-25% of children of divorced parents show serious long-term psychological problems. By comparison, 10% of children from intact marriages show serious long-term psychological problems.

**Long term effects**

In adult life a small proportion of individuals from families where divorce has occurred have difficulty making and maintaining stable marital relationships, have psychological adjustment difficulties and attain a lower socio-economic level in comparison with adults who have grown up in intact families.

## **FACTORS RELATED TO CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING DIVORCE**

Certain characteristics of children and certain features of their social contexts mediate the effects of parental divorce on their adjustment (Amato, 1993; Amato & Kieth, 1991a; Heatherington, 1989; Raschke, 1987; Wallerstein, 1991).

### **Child Factors**

The mean level of adjustment of children from families where divorce has occurred is associated with certain child characteristics including gender, age, temperament and intelligence. Better adjustment occurs in intelligent girls of easy temperament who are either in their infancy or late adolescence when divorce occurs. Poorer adjustment occurs in boys of low intelligence and difficult temperament who are in middle childhood when their parents divorce.

### **Contextual factors**

The mean level of adjustment of children from families where divorce has occurred is associated with certain characteristics of the child's family, social network and school environment. Important factors are time since divorce, parental conflict, parenting style, economic hardship, social support available to parents, parents psychological adjustment, composition of the sibling group, and school ethos. Better adjustment occurs usually after a two year period has elapsed, where the custodial parent is not experiencing financial hardship, where parental conflict is reduced and not channelled through the child, where a warm and consistent parenting style is employed, where the custodial parent is not experiencing economic hardship, where both parents have good social support

networks, where the sibling group is composed entirely of females and where the school provides a concerned student centred, achievement oriented ethos with a high level of student contact and supervision. Poorer adjustment occurs in the first two years following divorce where the custodial parent is experiencing financial hardship; where parental conflict is channelled through the child; where a punitive, permissive or chaotic parenting style is employed; where both parents have poor social support networks; where the sibling group is composed entirely of males or both males and females and where the school adopts a curriculum centred ethos characterized by low morale, little teacher-student personal contact and little supervision.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF STEP-FAMILIES**

The majority of divorced people remarry and these step-families have unique characteristics which are, in part, affected by the conditions under which they are formed (Heatherington, 1989; Raschke, 1987). On the positive side, surveys of step-families have found them to be more open in communication, more willing to deal with conflict, more pragmatic and less romantic and more egalitarian with respect to childcare and housekeeping tasks. On the negative side, compared with intact first marriages, step-families are less cohesive, and more stressful. Step-parent/child relationships on average tend to be more conflictual than parent-child relationships in intact families. This is particularly true of step-father daughter relationships and may be due to the daughter's perception of the step-father encroaching on a close mother-daughter relationship.

### **CHILDREN'S ADJUSTMENT FOLLOWING REMARRIAGE**

Children's adjustment following remarriage is associated with age, gender and parents' satisfaction with the new marriage (Heatherington & Bray, 1993). Good adjustment occurs when the custodial parent remarries while children are pre-adolescent or in their late adolescence or early adulthood. All children in divorced families resist the entry of a step-parent. But during the early teenage years (10-15) this resistance is at a maximum.

Divorced adults with children over 9 years but under 15 who wish to remarry should try to wait until after the children have reached about 16 years, if they want their new relationship to have a fair chance of survival. Remarriage is more disruptive for girls than for boys. Marital satisfaction in the new relationship has a protective effect for young boys and it is a risk factor for preadolescent girls. Young boys, benefit from their custodial mothers forming a satisfying relationship with a new partner. Such satisfying relationships lead step fathers to behave in a warm, child centred way towards their step sons and to help them learn sports and academic skills. These skills help young boys become psychologically robust. Preadolescent girls feel that the close supportive relationship they have with their divorced mothers is threatened by development of a new and satisfying marital relationship. They usually respond with increased acting out behaviour and psychological difficulties. In adolescence, when the remarriage has occurred while the children were pre-adolescent, a high level of marital satisfaction is associated with good adjustment and a high level of acceptance of the step-parent for both boys and girls.

## **MEDIATION**

Mediation is a structured approach to negotiating agreements about child care and financial issues where marital partners are separating (Emery & Wyre, 1987; Folberg & Milne, 1988; Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 1992). Mediation is a co-operative alternative to litigation. It may be conducted by a mediator (often a mental health

professional with special mediation training) or by a mediator and lawyer team. When mediation and litigation are compared, mediation is more efficient and effective in leading to initial agreements about childcare and finances. Mediation may also lead to better long term co-operation between partners in managing children. However, mediation does not ameliorate short term psychological distress and adjustment problems associated with divorce.

### **THE EFFECTS OF POST-DIVORCE THERAPY**

Structured child-centred therapy programmes for children of divorce and behavioural skills training programmes for custodial single parents have both been developed and evaluated in the US (Grych & Fincham, 1992). Behavioural parenting skills training programmes have been found to enhance parenting skills, reduce children's conduct problems and foster parent-child relationships. Child-centred therapy programmes have been found to enhance self-esteem and improve children's attitudes to both parents

### **RESEARCH & SERVICE DEVELOPMENT PRIORITIES**

The majority of children and parents adjust to divorce. Certain psychological interventions can aid this adjustment process. These include mediation at the time of separation, structured child-focused therapy following separation and behavioural parenting skills training following separation. A major challenge is to insure that adequate mediation and post-divorce psychological and social services are made available to compliment available legal services. These services require rigorous scientific evaluation to test their effectiveness. Another important research priority is to continue to explore factors associated with successful adjustment to divorce through well designed longitudinal studies.

## SUMMARY

In this synthesis of the international literature on psychological aspects of divorce, the causes and consequences of divorce for parents and children are summarized. The majority of parents and children show no major long-term adverse psychological consequences to divorce. Personal and contextual factors that mediate the impact of divorce on parents and children and that may account of the negative impact of divorce on a minority of parents and children are also examined. The impact of mediation and of post-divorce therapy are described and priorities for research and service development identified.

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