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The Case for Divorce

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Frequently in public and academic debates about the costs and benefits of marriage and divorce, evidence about health or economic consequences is used to support various perspectives. The book *The Case for Marriage* is a familiar example of this, and so we consider here "The Case for Divorce." This chapter offers evidence about when divorce leads to health benefits, rather than to more often reported negative health consequences. In particular, research shows that there are negative health consequences to remaining in a distressed marriage. The chapter also offers advice about the three things any reader of marriage and divorce research should look out for when trying to understand how useful or generalizable the claims are. Readers should consider whether marital quality has been considered—and how it has been measured; whether domestic violence and other pathologies have been examined; and whether "selection effects," or forces that occurred prior to marriage and that don't have anything to do with the marriage or the divorce itself but that make people more likely to divorce, have been tested. Finally, the chapter asks how we can explicitly—rather than implicitly—express values and beliefs when talking about the case for divorce.

Starting in 1880, when U.S. divorce statistics began to be recorded, the rate of divorce increased steadily for eighty years and then increased dramatically from 1960 to 1980.[1] By the end of that period, about half of all marriages ended in divorce. Since then, our 50 percent divorce rate has leveled off, and we haven't seen much change.[2]

Divorce policy has changed in that time. In the 1970s, there was a shift in divorce laws to allow unilateral divorce ("no-fault divorce") in the United States. Since that time, rates of wife's suicide, domestic violence, and spousal homicide

have declined.[3] Meanwhile, the number of children involved in any given divorce has gone from 1.34 children to less than 1 child per divorce[4] because of the declining birthrate.

Increases in divorce have made it a fixture in family life—and a "problem" to be understood, interpreted, analyzed, and fixed.[5] But what exactly is the problem? A better understanding of divorce—and divorce research—clarifies the case for divorce, and by extension informs us about life as it really is in contemporary families. The case for divorce asks: Are there some cases where divorce is a *better* outcome than remaining married? Three decades of research on the impact on adults and children points to yes.

Researching the Impact of Divorce

While discussion of research methods leaves some people cold or in wish of a nap, the consistent hallmark of the best research on the impact of divorce is that it makes a logical and reasonable comparison. Some studies do this. But some don't. It is as simple as this: if my now-divorced parents had been happily married, life would have been different, and a divorce would have been a big loss to them, me, my brothers, and the community. But that wasn't the case. They treated each other with contempt, led parallel lives, lived through their children (and also did a lot of good things). Then they were divorced.

The logical comparison for divorce versus not divorce in my own biography is a comparison between having unhappily married parents or divorced parents who moved on. My parents' post-divorce lives were up and down, but ultimately a lot more sensible for all involved, and (crucially) better than the life that preceded the divorce. Research that asks "compared to what?" is designed to do a what-if exercise—not just with one person's story—but with the stories of many.

When researchers carefully examine "divorce compared to what?" they are sometimes searching for *selection bias*—a particular kind of problem that shows there is something about the people who get divorced that happened before they got into the current situation that makes them more likely to divorce. Some attributes that existed before the marriage may affect who divorces. So when we compare divorced people to people who stayed married, the question is whether selection bias has influenced the results. There is selection bias if the divorced group was already different from the stably married group. For example, getting married at a younger age, living in poverty, and not having a college degree are all associated with divorce. Already we see that selection bias plays a role in divorce. But how have researchers answered the question about how or whether

divorce causes problems for adults or their children? Selection bias may explain some, but certainly not all, of today's divorces.

The case for divorce includes research on children as well as research on adults. In the first section below, "Resilient Children of Divorce," I show how the research on the impact of divorce on children teaches us two important lessons. First, most children of divorce do well. And second, children who remain in high-conflict families, where the parents have a distressed marriage, are at greater risk for problems. When parents divorce, children have already been subject to their distressed marriages, and that is what puts these children at greater risk for problems. In the second section—"Does Divorce Make You Happy?"—I discuss how research on the impact of divorce on adults follows a similar pattern: the consequences of a harsh or conflictual marriage exceed the consequences of divorce. In the third section, "Measuring Divorce's Impact with and without a Comparison Group," I show new evidence about how neutral the impact of divorce really is on children. At the same time, I remind you of the problems of research that fails to have a logical comparison group. As the research shows us, the case for divorce is straightforward. The consequences of remaining in a distressed marriage for children as well as for adults are myriad and long-lived. In those cases, perhaps the line shouldn't be "stay together for the kids," but "get divorced for the kids," not to mention for the health and well-being of the parents, on whom the children depend.

Resilient Children of Divorce

In 1989, psychologist Mavis Hetherington presented her research at the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, showing that most children of divorce fare just as well as children from intact families. She had established a comparative rate of distress among children: while 10 percent of children in the general population have behavioral or school-related problems, 20–25 percent of children from divorced families have these problems (but about 80 percent of the children of divorce do not have such problems). Numerous research papers provided more detail and supported the finding in her research.

Hetherington reported on specific kinds of distress that parents and children experience with divorce. She found a "crisis period" of about two years surrounding the divorce. She learned that, depending on the timing of divorce, boys and girls have different responses: when boys have problems, they tend to "act out"; when girls have problems, they are more likely to become depressed. But what Hetherington saw overall was the *resilience* of children of divorce.[6] Most children did fine. They were able to use personal resources and social networks in their family and community to cope.

Another study came out that year that refuted these findings, but also differed in terms of how the research was conducted. Psychologist Judith Wallerstein reported her research finding that children of divorce experienced more mental health problems than children of nondivorced, married families. She found that these children sometimes suffered a "sleeper effect"; their difficulty emerged as adults—hence the phrase "adult children of divorce"—keeping us ever vigilant for some lurking form of damage that could pop up like a dormant cancer.

To judge between these two pieces of research, we need to look at how these psychologists collected their information.

Wallerstein's methods: She studied a *clinical* sample of young, white, upper-middle-class teenagers whose parents had been divorced and who sought treatment at a mental health center in Northern California.[7] A clinical sample involves people who want help. They are a sample of folks who are, by definition, troubled. While a clinical sample can teach us much about the course of mental disturbances or adjustment problems, it cannot inform us about the prevalence or origins of a problem in the population, or reveal why some people end up doing well in the face of adversity while others do not. Wallerstein provided cases full of rich detail, but they were not *representative*. Her study has the strength of being *longitudinal* (that is, she tracked her subjects over time), but her evidence couldn't tell us whether these problems occur consistently in the population, or if they were due to selection bias. Children of divorce who are troubled are, by definition, the ones who seek therapy.

Hetherington's methods: Researchers obtained a population-based sample of stably married families with a four-year-old and followed them over time. It was a *prospective*, longitudinal study. *Prospective* means that the study started before any divorces happened. Using a series of observations, parental reports, and teacher reports, Hetherington tracked these children in their everyday lives. Some children's parents went on to divorce; others remained together. We can't do experiments where we randomly assign some children to divorced parents and others to married parents, but this gives us a quasi-experimental design that helps us evaluate the impact of divorce compared to no divorce. In the comparison, all the children started off the same in the sense that they weren't showing up in the study because they already had "problems." Not only did this design allow researchers to compare children whose parents divorced versus those whose parents stayed together, it also enabled the researchers to see how children fared before the divorce versus how they were doing after the divorce. Hetherington had built-in comparisons.[8]

As research progressed, Hetherington learned more about divorce and children. Because she had detailed information about both kinds of families, she was able to compare married families with divorced families. Sometimes the married families were extremely distressed; sometimes they were civil. Hetherington was able to analyze the well-being of children in extremely distressed married families versus children of divorce and children in harmoniously married families. By adding comparisons about the level of distress in all the families, she observed that children in harmonious married families fared better than children in divorced families *and* in distressed married families. Here's the punch line: The worst kind of family for a child to be raised in, in terms of mental health and behavior, was a *distressed married* family.[9]

Several key pieces of research extended Hetherington's results by using comparison groups and a prospective design. In 1991, demographer Andrew Cherlin and his colleagues wrote about longitudinal studies in Great Britain and the United States in the journal *Science*. The studies included data from parents, children, and teachers over time. At the first time point, age seven, all the children's parents were married. Over the study period, some went on to divorce, and some did not. Cherlin confirmed Hetherington's findings: While about 10 percent of children overall are at risk for adjustment and mental health problems, children of divorce are about 20–25 percent at risk for problems. Seventy-five to 80 percent of the children are fine.[10]

Cherlin also found that the difference between the children of divorce versus children in stable marriages existed *prior* to the divorce. These were *predisruption effects*, and here's how it makes sense: Parents who end up divorcing are different from parents who don't end up divorcing. They relate to each other differently; they relate to their children differently; and their children relate to them differently. Cherlin had identified selection bias, or a case of selection for who divorces.

In 1998, Cherlin and his colleagues offered an update on their continuing research.[11] Respondents analyzed in the 1991 study had gotten older, so he had more information. While the 1991 paper highlighted predisruption effects, this one reported that there were *postdisruption* effects (negative effects after the divorce) that accumulated and made life more difficult for children of divorce. Financial hardship and the loss of paternal involvement were key culprits. He called this phenomenon the "cascade of negative life events" and emphasized, as he had back in 1991, the importance of social and institutional supports for children in disrupted and remarried families.

A similar longitudinal study by Paul Amato and Juliana Sobolewski replicated these results in 2001.[12] They studied stably married, distressed but married, and divorced families over the course of seventeen years. They observed that grown children whose parents had divorced during their childhood had more adjustment problems. Although these adjustment problems were associated with

predisruption effects—in other words, trouble in the family that preceded the divorce—postdisruption effects accumulated, too. Finally, the researchers found that children who grew up with married parents in distressed unions were more likely to experience psychological distress in later life, in contrast to their counterparts with nondistressed, stably married parents.

Starting with Hetherington in the 1980s, and following through Cherlin's parallel work in the 1990s, research designs that included comparison groups helped bring to light three points. First, using a population-based rather than a clinical sample provided a rate of distress among children of divorce that exemplified their *resilience*: approximately 80 percent were doing well versus 90 percent of children in the general population who were doing well. Second, difficulties—predisruption effects—found in longitudinal, prospective studies, indicated that children in families where their parents were headed for divorce were having troubles prior to the breakup. Postdisruption effects—and the cascade of negative life events—also played a role. Third, distressed marriages were harder on children than divorces. This last point foreshadowed the results in the studies of adults that I describe next.

Does Divorce Make You Happy?

People who divorce do not go through such a costly and difficult process just to "feel good" or in some casual way to be happy. As you'll see below, research shows us just how difficult living in a distressed marriage is. The research shows us that divorce makes people feel better in the same way that the cessation of pain or illness makes them feel better.

In 2002, Linda Waite, a demographer at the University of Chicago, and several of her colleagues, released a study titled "Does Divorce Make People Happy?" At the same time, I was completing research at the University of Washington for a paper that would be titled "The Case for Divorce: Under What Conditions Is Divorce Beneficial and for Whom?"[13]

Our results were completely divergent. We both asked: How does people's level of well-being change when they divorce (versus when they stay married)? Both projects relied on the same data set; they both used a longitudinal design where all the people were married at the first time point, and some of them went on to divorce by the second time point. I found that adults who exited unhappy marriages were less depressed than those who stayed. According to Waite, there were no differences in happiness between those who stayed in their marriages and those who divorced.

What is the point? Should we throw up our hands and claim that research is merely a Rorschach test, a projective test that displays and reveals our deep-seated values and biases? For goodness' sake, no!

Instead, ask: "Divorce compared to what?" Were people who divorced compared to those who stayed in a happy marriage, or compared to those who stayed in a stressed-out marriage? One difference between Waite's study and mine was that I used a more stringent measure of marital distress. I was able to detect the people who were in seriously distressed marriages. (I also took severe domestic violence into account, and I measured depression rather than "happiness.") The contrast makes all the difference. When comparing how markedly unhappily married people fare compared to people who divorced, the divorcing people were less depressed, and the unhappily married people were more depressed. My additional statistical tests ("fixed effects," discussed below) confirmed that marital distress, not other factors, accounted for the differences between the unhappily married and divorced groups. In other words, what made the married people in distressed marriages more depressed was *being in a distressed marriage*, not their risk of depression.

Other longitudinal studies, including a study by Daniel Hawkins and Alan Booth,[14] found similar results regarding marital distress: the more carefully marital distress was measured, the more pronounced were the psychological advantages of leaving over staying. Again, a better comparison between married and divorced people was accomplished by using a thoughtful measurement of marital quality. A study by Pamela Smock and her colleagues assessed the economic costs of divorcing and also used methods that took into account selection bias. Smock and her colleagues found that divorced women experience economic disadvantages but that some of that economic disadvantage would have existed even if they had remained married.[15] With psychological distress, as with economic distress, people who divorced were different for reasons *other* than divorcing, not *because* of divorcing.

More recent research has examined how the accumulation of marital transitions—a divorce, a cohabitation, a breakup, perhaps a remarriage—may be an additional important way to examine the impact of divorce. The approach is to examine "relationship trajectories." Sarah Meadows and her colleagues[16] examined the consequence of such multiple transitions for women who started as single mothers, and found that for women who face continuous instability—rather than a single transition—their health was negatively affected. Such research allows for even more complexity, and requires that we compare higher levels of disruption with lower levels of disruption, including divorce.

Why Marital Quality Matters

Marital quality makes a difference when we ask whether divorce is better than staying married. The benefits of marriage accrue only to people in happy and well-functioning marriages; the benefits of happy marriages are, indeed, robust. The same is not true for people in distressed marriages, and we save those marriages at our—and our partners'—peril. For example, studies on the "psychophysiology of marriage" show that when men and women are in distressed marriages—where they may experience contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling—their immune systems decline over time.[17] These people are less healthy and less happy. Troubled marriages have immediate costs; they also have downstream health costs as the years of distress accumulate.

Research has demonstrated how high those costs are. Weissman used community mental health samples to assess the impact of marriage and marital distress on rates of major depression.[18] While the study found that depression was reduced for people in happy marriages, depression for men *and* women in unhappy marriages was *twenty-five* times more likely than for people in happy marriages. Another study found that marital dissatisfaction a year earlier is associated with a 2.7 times greater depression risk for women and with an elevated rate of depression for men. Even more alarming is a study that showed that, among married women who were more depressed than average, by far the most common explanation was domestic violence. In my research, women who were victims of domestic violence—severe enough to have been injured in the past year—were different in their response to distress and divorce from those in nonviolent distressed marriages, likely because the problems domestic violence victims have to solve are different from the problems of those who are in distressed but nonviolent marriages. This suggests that clear research on divorce should always seek to identify victims of abuse because these cases follow a different story line.[19]

When researchers measure marital distress in terms of level of conflict, or they use multiple measures of distress and find high conflict and distress, they find that divorce is a relief to those couples. This parallels what Hetherington found for children—that divorce is better than living in a high-conflict family. It is easy enough to ask, "How was marital distress measured?" in order to learn whether a measure of general happiness that merely captures transient feelings of satisfaction was used, or whether a measure of serious distress or conflict, which tends to identify which couples are "candidates" for divorce, was used.

On Happiness

Other measures matter, too: My study and the Waite study both looked at the personal costs of divorcing. While Waite measured "happiness," I measured "depression." It matters how we measure "personal well-being." While van Hemert and

colleagues have found that happiness and depression are correlated, there's a big difference between them. Out of hundreds of correlational studies catalogued by Veenhoven in the World Database of Happiness, there are scarcely any gender differences in happiness. Nor does happiness have the major correlates to race or poverty that have been well established for depression.[20]

All these differences suggest that "happiness" is measuring something psychologically different from "distress" or "depression." The societal implications are quite different between these two measures. Greenberg and colleagues have found that unhappy people are not usually functionally impaired, but that depression involves costs in terms of lost wages, productivity, and negative impact on children.[21] The lesson of these studies is that what we measure, as well as whether we include a good comparison, will help us better understand when and how divorce has consequences.

Measuring Divorce's Impact with and without a Comparison Group

In April 2008 the questions about the impact of divorce and its costs continued to be alive and well. Two studies were released the very same week on the topic. These studies asked: What is the impact of divorce? A release from the Council on Contemporary Families was based on demographer Allen Li's research. The other paper, by economist Ben Scafidi, was released by the Institute for American Values. Li's paper pertained to the emotional impact of divorce on children, while Scafidi's paper addressed the economic impact of divorce across America.[22]

The results in the two papers were completely divergent. Li asked: What is the impact of divorce on children? He found that divorce itself does not explain the differences between children with divorced and married parents. He did find differences between the two groups (on average)—just as researchers have been finding since the 1980s. With increasingly refined research techniques, however, Li was able to show that *selection bias*—or a case of improper comparisons—is what accounts for the differences.

Li's technique included testing for "fixed effects"—a statistical tool used in economics and biomedical research with longitudinal data. Fixed-effects models tell us if there are aspects of the individuals that are not measured explicitly but that account for results. The children in Li's study whose parents ended up divorcing were getting a different kind of parenting all along the way when compared with the children whose parents stayed married.

Meanwhile, Scafidi asked: What does divorce cost the general public? Hold on to your hats. By his calculations, divorce—plus single parenthood—costs taxpayers $112 billion a year. To calculate this, he assumed that divorce and single

parenthood *cause* poverty. In other words, he neglected the notion that selection bias could play a role in who ends up as a single parent or who gets divorced. In a 2002 report, historian Stephanie Coontz and economist Nancy Folbre examined the problems with assuming that divorce and single parenthood cause poverty by taking into account selection bias.[23] While there is a correlation between single parenthood and poverty, the correlation does not mean that single parenthood *causes* poverty. *Causation* is complex and challenging to establish, but the evidence that causality flows in the other direction—that poverty often *causes* or precedes single parenthood—is to many analysts a lot stronger. As Stevenson and Wolfers point out, Scafidi neglected comparisons in another way as well: while some women end up losing financially following divorce, others actually *gain*.[24] Scafidi did not include these economic gains in his equations.

The results were divergent because of their fundamental differences in thinking about "what causes what?" While Li's article asks, "divorce *compared to what*?" Scafidi did not assess the costs of divorce relative to, for example, remaining in a distressed, tumultuous, or violent family situation. Scafidi didn't test the premise that divorce (and single parenthood) causes economic problems. He assumed that it did.

Meanwhile, other researchers continue to find that selection bias accounts for some if not all the differences between children whose parents divorce and children whose parents remain married to each other. For example, in 2007 Fomby and Cherlin found that the characteristics of the mother that precede the divorce helped explain the reduced cognitive outcomes for children of divorce.[25] In their study, they also found that postdisruption effects of the divorce, rather than just selection bias or predisruption effects, also were associated with behavioral problems sometimes seen in children of divorce. Just as research on relationship trajectories may help us better understand how and when divorce is difficult on adults, this same promising line of research may further explain the postdisruption effects of divorce on children. It turns out that children exposed to multiple transitions—a divorce, then a cohabitation and breakup, then perhaps another marriage—may be at elevated risk relative to children exposed to only one transition. In a 2007 study that focused on single parents, Osborne and McLanahan[26] found that the accumulation of a mother's relationship transitions leads to hardship for her children.

Lessons Learned

Divorce researchers who use comparison groups and control for selection bias, who measure marital quality carefully, and who take domestic violence into account may still disagree about just how different children of divorce are from children of married parents. (Are 20 percent affected? Are 25 percent affected?) But they agree about the resilience of children in the face of divorce. Researchers may disagree about whether the impact of divorce is neutral, as Allen Li argues, or whether some of the impact of divorce is due to preexisting factors, or whether some of the impact of divorce should be attributed to postdisruption factors, or whether relationship trajectory research is an important piece of the puzzle about the circumstances under which divorce is harder on children. Scientists agree, however, that comparing married families to divorced families without taking selection bias into account is a case of comparing apples to oranges and will get us nowhere in terms of helping families. As Rutter, Hawkins, and Hetherington all show, failing to take the quality of the marriages seriously is like ignoring the elephant in the room! The distressed marriage is where most people considering divorce start. And this distress is highly costly to the health and mental health of parents and their children.

If you are reading research on marriage and divorce—or listening to someone's conclusions about it—always remember to ask, "Did this study include a comparison group and take selection bias into account?" and "Did the researchers measure things—especially marital distress—carefully?"

When I ask these questions—and when I look at the role of divorce in U.S. history—I see a complicated story. Above all, I have discovered that there is a case for divorce. There are times and situations when divorce is beneficial to the people who divorce and to their children.

Notes

1. See Ruggles (1997).
2. See Heuveline (2005).
3. Discussed by Stevenson and Wolfers (2006).
4. Reported by Cowen (2007).
5. See Coltrane and Adams (2003).
6. See Hetherington and Stanley-Hagan (1997).
7. See Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1988).
8. A complete, accessible review of Hetherington's longitudinal research is in Hetherington and Kelly (2002).
9. See Hetherington (1999).
10. Cherlin et al. (1991).
11. Cherlin et al. (1998).
12. Amato and Sobolewski (2001).
13. See Waite et al. (2002); Rutter (2004).