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■ READING 18

Divorce: Challenges, Changes, and New Chances

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Studies of the effects of divorce on family members traditionally have centered around the development of problem behaviors subsequent to marital dissolution. Recent findings, however, have emphasized the wide variation in responses to stressful experiences and life transitions, including divorce and remarriage (e.g., Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1987; Hether-

ington, 1991a). Although debate still exists over the question of the magnitude and duration of the effects of parental divorce on children, work in the past 10 years has converged in suggesting that the interaction among individual differences in personal and familial characteristics and extrafamilial factors that support or undermine coping efforts by family members must be examined in order to understand the spectrum of responses to divorce. This spectrum can range from enhanced competence to clinical levels of problem behavior (Hetherington, 1989, 1991a; Stolberg, Camplair, Currier, & Wells, 1987).

In addition, it is becoming increasingly apparent that divorce should be viewed not as a discrete event but as part of a series of family transitions and changes in family relationships. The response to any family transition will depend both on what precedes and follows it. The response to divorce and life in a single-parent household will be influenced by individual adjustment and the quality of family relationships before the divorce as well as circumstances surrounding and following the divorce. In many families, divorce may trigger a series of adverse transactional factors such as economic decline, parenting stress, and physical and psychological dysfunction in family members. For others, it may present an escape from conflict and an unsatisfying marital relationship, a chance to form more gratifying and harmonious relationships, and an opportunity for personal growth and individuation (Gore & Eckenroade, 1992; Hetherington, 1989).

The recognition that divorce is part of a chain of marital transitions and shifting life experiences, and that individual responses to these experiences demonstrate marked variability, has been a powerful influence on recent theoretical models developed to explain children's adjustment to parental divorce. In understanding these findings, many researchers have adopted a developmental contextual framework (Gore & Eckenroade, 1992; Nock, 1982; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Hetherington & Martin, 1986). This approach examines adjustment across time, and on multiple levels, including interactions among the overarching social and historical context, changing dynamics within the family system, individual ontogenic characteristics of child and parent, and influences external to the family such as the extended family, peer relationships, and the educational, occupational, mental health, legal, religious, and welfare systems.

The purpose of this chapter is not to present a comprehensive review of research and clinical findings concerning the adjustment to divorce. Selected recent research examples and a developmental, contextual, interactive model will be used as an organizational framework in which to examine factors that contribute to individual differences in the way family members negotiate the changes and challenges associated with divorce. Many of the research findings will be drawn from the longitudinal studies of Hetherington and her colleagues. Before discussing the factors implicated in a developmental, contextual, interactive approach, it is important to place the findings in the larger context of demographic and social changes that have occurred in the last 20 years.

THE CHANGING WORLD OF THE FAMILY: DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL FORCES

Although the divorce rate doubled between 1960 and 1980, it has leveled off and even declined slightly in the past decade (Glick, 1988). Currently, it is estimated that half of all marriages will end in divorce and that approximately 60% of these dissolutions will

involve children. Although the percentage of marriages ending in divorce has not changed appreciably since the early 1980s, the number of children affected by parental divorce, as well as the number of children from divorced families now of marriageable age themselves, has continued to increase (Bumpass, 1984). It has been estimated that 38% of white children and 75% of African-American children born to married parents in the United States will experience their parents' divorce before their 16th birthday (Bumpass, 1984). In addition, African-Americans not only have a higher rate of divorce than whites, they are also more likely to separate but not go through a legal divorce procedure, to experience a longer time-lag between time of separation and divorce, and are less likely to remarry (Glick, 1988; Teachman, Polonko, & Scanzoni, 1987). Although families who are poor, African-American, and suffering multiple life stresses are more likely to divorce, the rise in economic independence for well-educated women also has led to a greater likelihood that these women will divorce compared to their less-educated peers. Furthermore, since most divorced men and women remarry, and since the rate of divorce in second marriages is even higher than in first marriages (61% of men and 54% of women go through a second divorce), many children and parents encounter a series of marital transitions and reorganizations in family roles and relationships (Glick, 1988; Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). These statistics indicate that divorce, once considered an atypical family event, is now a "normative," even if not a "normal," experience in the life cycle of many contemporary American families (Emery & Forehand, 1992).

Shifting social and historical factors affect patterns of both marriage and divorce (Cherlin, 1981; Teachman et al., 1987; Glick, 1988). Wars, whether the Civil War, World War II, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War, have been associated with hasty marriages followed by increased rates of divorce (Glick, 1988). Current high rates of divorce have also been attributed to greater labor force participation and economic independence of women, improved contraception, the emergence of the welfare system, an increase in the proportion of marriages involving premarital births, changing ideologies associated with the women's movement, and the liberalization of divorce laws. The family is being reshaped in response to transformations in social values and roles. Greater diversity in attitudes and accepted behaviors are found not only in family and gender roles but also in other social systems—in law, politics, religion, education, and the workplace. Divorce and the concomitant experiences of family members are only one reflection of the need for social institutions, such as the family, to adapt to historical and social change.

WHY MARRIAGES FAIL: THE PRECURSORS OF DIVORCE

Neither marital satisfaction nor sheer frequency of disagreements is a good predictor of divorce. Instead, styles of conflict resolution involving disengagement, stonewalling, contempt, denial, and blaming are likely to be associated with divorce (Gottman, 1994; Hetherington, 1989). One of the most common patterns of marital relations leading to divorce is a conflict-confronting, conflict-avoiding pattern where one spouse, usually the wife, confronts areas of concern and disagreements in the marriage and expresses her feelings about these problems, while the other spouse responds with defensiveness, avoidance, withdrawal, whining, and, if prodded, with resentment and anger. A second common

marital pattern associated with later divorce is one in which couples have little overt conflict, but have different expectations and perceptions about family life, marriage and their children, and have few shared interests, activities, or friends (Hetherington & Tryon, 1989; Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983).

These patterns of relating in dysfunctional couples means that many children before the divorce are likely to have been exposed to unresolved disagreements, resentment, anger, and ineffective marital problem solving. Prospective studies indicate that troubled marital relations and interparental tension accompanied by unsupportive parenting and high rates of behavior problems in children occur years before the dissolution of the marriage (Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986, 1988; Cherlin et al., 1991). The inept parenting and behavior disorders usually attributed to divorce and life in a one-parent household may, to some extent, be a continuation of predivorce functioning and be associated with disrupted processes in the nuclear family. Although the popular interpretation of these findings is that marital tension, alienation and conflict cause inept parenting and behavior problems in children, it may be that the stress of dealing with a difficult, noncompliant, antisocial child helps to undermine an already fragile marriage and precipitates divorce.

Recently, another explanation, based on the findings of twin studies, has been proposed. It suggests that divorce and problem behaviors in children are genetically linked, and that this may help to explain the slightly higher rates of divorce found in offspring of divorced parents (McGue & Lykken, in press). Irritable, antisocial behavior in parents may provoke marital problems and be genetically associated with behavior problems in children, with the subsequent marital difficulties of adult offspring of divorced parents, and with the intergenerational transmission of divorce. Whatever the reasons may be for the dysfunctional precursors of divorce, it is against a background of disrupted family relationships and disordered behavior in parents and children that family members move into the changes and challenges associated with separation, divorce, and life in a one-parent household.

CHANGES IN THE LIVING SITUATION

An established family system can be viewed as a mechanism for identifying and framing the roles, activities, and daily life of each family member. When a divorce occurs, it means not only the loss of patterns of everyday family interaction and a family member, but loss of a way of life. Pervasive alterations in expectations, life experiences, and the sense of self in parents and children are associated with the uncertainty, found not only in divorce, but also in other transitions, such as loss of a family member through death (Silverman, 1988) or even with the addition of a family member through remarriage (Hetherington, in press).

Immediately following divorce, household routines and roles break down and parents experience task overload as a single parent attempts to perform the tasks usually assumed by two parents. In such situations, children, especially daughters, in divorced families are often asked to assume responsibility for household chores and care of younger siblings. Many of the interactions between custodial mothers and their children, are instrumental in nature and occur in the context of shared tasks. The problems of overwhelming responsibility for parent and child are often exacerbated when divorced

mothers must begin working or increase their workload because of economic necessity (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985).

In the first year following divorce, the average family income of women decreases by almost 40%. Although income relative to needs gradually increases, even 5 years after divorce, the income of divorced mothers remains at 94% of their predivorced income, in contrast to 130% for divorced fathers and 125% for remarried women (Duncan & Hoffman, 1985). This is the result, in part, of partial or intermittent payment, or nonpayment, of child support by 70% of divorced noncustodial fathers. This loss of income following marital dissolution often determines where families live, where children go to school, the quality of neighborhoods and peer groups, and the accessibility of jobs, health care, and support networks. Although income level or loss explains only a small amount of the variance related to children's adjustment following divorce, poverty does increase the probability of encountering these other transactional factors associated with the ability of parents and children to manage stress successfully and with developmental outcomes for children. Negative life stresses are most marked for members of divorced families in the first 2 years following divorce and gradually decline with time; however, they always remain higher than those in nondivorced families (Forgatch, Patterson, & Ray, in press; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985). An unexpected bill, illness, or a school closing may present a greater emergency for a divorced mother than for parents in a two-parent household with mutual support and greater resources.

In spite of the difficulties encountered by divorced women, by 2 years after divorce, whether or not they initiated the divorce, the vast majority of women report being more satisfied with their family situation than they had been in the last year of their marriage. Furthermore, although divorced mothers report more child-rearing stress than do nondivorced mothers, they also say that parenting is easier without a nonsupportive spouse who undermines or disagrees with their parenting practices. The balance between increased risk and stressors and positive life changes must be considered in examining the response to divorce (Hetherington, in press).

CUSTODY, CONTACT, AND CO-PARENTAL RELATIONS

In the vast majority of divorces, the mother is awarded custody of children; only 13% of fathers are awarded sole custody of their children at the time of divorce (Emery, 1988). In these cases, it is often because mothers are deemed incompetent, do not want custody of their children, or because male or adolescent children are involved. In spite of the overt or covert legal preference for mothers as custodians under the guise of best interests of the child or primary caregivers guidelines, there is no consistent evidence that fathers who seek custody are less competent parents than mothers (Warshak, 1992). In fact, by 2 years after divorce, custodial fathers report better family relations and fewer problems with their children than do custodial mothers (Furstenberg, 1988). This may be because custodial fathers, in contrast to custodial mothers, have higher incomes, more available supports, and are more likely to be caring for older children. In addition, fathers may be less sensitive and responsive than mothers to family dysfunction and behavior problems in children. However, reluctant fathers who assent to assume custody

because of their wives' inability or disinclination to care for their children are less involved and able parents. A finding relevant to decisions involving custody is that, although there is some continuity in the pre- and postdivorce quality of parenting for mothers, there is little for fathers (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982). Some custodial fathers seem to exhibit a *Kramer vs. Kramer* response and develop an involvement and parenting skills they had not had before the divorce, but some intensely attached noncustodial fathers find intermittent parenting painful and withdraw from their children. On the other hand, a substantial number of noncustodial fathers report that their relationship with their children improves after divorce.

On the average, noncustodial fathers become increasingly less available to their children. In the most recent national study using a probability sample, mothers reported that, following divorce, only one-quarter of children see their fathers once a week or more, and over a third do not see their father at all or see them only a few times a year (Seltzer, 1991). Physical distance in residence, low socioeconomic status, remarriage, and having only female rather than male children are associated with less visitation by noncustodial fathers. Noncustodial mothers are more likely to maintain contact with their children than are noncustodial fathers (Furstenberg, 1988; Zill, 1988). This leads to the rather intriguing issue as to whether differences found in children in a mother's custody, and a father's custody are attributable to the relationship with the custodial parent or to differences in the child's contact with the noncustodial parent and additional support in childrearing for custodial fathers provided by noncustodial mothers.

The move toward facilitating visitation and joint custody has been based on the premises that continued contact with both parents is desirable and that noncustodial parents with joint custody will be more likely to maintain contact and financial support. The response to the first premise must be that it depends on who is doing the visiting and on the relationship between the parents. If the noncustodial parent is reasonably well-adjusted, competent in parenting, and has a close relationship with the child, and if the child is not exposed to conflict between the two parents, continued contact can have a salutary effect on the child's adjustment. However, it takes an exceptionally close relationship with a noncustodial parent to buffer a child from the deleterious effects of a conflictual, nonsupportive relationship with a custodial parent (Hetherington et al., 1982). If there is high conflict between the parents, joint custody and continued contact can have adverse effects on the child (Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1988; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Furthermore, there is some evidence that, after remarriage, although continued involvement of the noncustodial father with the child does not interfere with family functioning in the stepfamily, frequent visits by the noncustodial mother may be associated with negative relations between children, especially daughters, and their stepmothers (Brand, Clingempeel, & Bowen-Woodward, 1988).

Although cooperative, consensual coparenting following divorce is the ideal relationship (Camara & Resnick, 1988), in most cases the best that can be attained is one of independent but noninterfering parental relations. In a substantial group of families, conflict is sustained or accelerates following divorce (Hetherington et al., 1982; Kline, Johnston, & Tschan, 1991; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1990). Interparental conflict in the long run is related to diminished contact and fewer child support payments by noncustodial fathers (Seltzer, 1991). In addition, in such conflicted relationships, children may feel caught in the middle as they are sometimes asked to carry messages between parents,

to inform each parent of the other's activities, to defend one parent against the other's disparaging remarks, or to justify wanting to spend time with the other parent (Buchanon, Maccoby, & Dombusch, 1991; Hetherington, in press). Being "caught in the middle," rather than divorce per se, or loss of contact with a noncustodial parent, has the most adverse effect on children's behavior and psychological well-being. Parental conflict provides children with an opportunity to exploit parents and play one off against the other, and when they are older, to escape careful monitoring of their activities. However children, especially older children, are able to function well over time in independent, noninterfering households. As long as they are not involved in parental conflict, children are able to cope well even if these households have different rules and expectations. Children are able to learn the differing role demands and constraints required in relating to diverse people in a variety of social situations such as in the peer group, church, the classroom, on the playing field, or at grandmother's house. In view of children's adaptability and differentiated responses to a broad range of social situations, the resistance to recognizing that children can cope with two different home situations is remarkable. Problems in joint custody come when parents interfere in each other's childrearing, and when children don't want to leave their friends, neighborhoods, or regular routines. In the rare cases where joint custody requires shifts between schools, this too may become a burden. Difficulty in visitation under any custody arrangement may emerge as children grow older and want to spend more time with their peers and less with parents.

Joint custody does tend to promote greater contact and financial support by noncustodial parents (Maccoby et al., 1988). Noncustodial fathers or fathers with joint custody are more likely to support children when they feel they have power in decisions relating to their children's life circumstances and activities. However, under conditions of high conflict, the increased contact associated with joint custody can be detrimental to the well-being of the child. Under conditions of low or encapsulated conflict, or emotional distancing between the parents, the effects of contact will be positive or at least neutral. Most children want to maintain contact with both parents and are more satisfied with continued contact. However, if the custodial parent has formed a hostile alliance with the child against the noncustodial parent, if the child feels caught in the middle of the parental conflict, or if the noncustodial parent has been extremely dysfunctional (e.g., abusive), children may seek to limit their contact with the nonresidential parent.

ADJUSTMENT OF DIVORCED PARENTS

Separation and divorce place both men and women at risk for psychological and physical dysfunction (Chase-Lansdale & Hetherington, 1990). In the immediate aftermath of marital dissolution, both men and women often exhibit extreme emotional lability, anger, depression, anxiety, and impulsive, and antisocial behavior, but for most this is gone by 2 years following divorce. However, even in the long run, alcoholism, drug abuse, psychosomatic problems, accidents, depression, and antisocial behavior are more common in divorced than nondivorced adults (Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978). Furthermore, recent research suggests that marital disruption alters the immune system, making divorced persons more vulnerable to disease, infection, chronic and acute medical problems, and even death (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987). Some of these postdivorce symptoms in adults,

such as depression and antisocial behavior, seem likely to have been present before divorce and even to have contributed to a distressed marriage and to marital dissolution. Depression and antisocial behavior are related to irritable, conflictual marital interactions. Adults exhibiting antisocial behavior are more likely to have disordered social relationships, to encounter negative life events, and to undergo multiple marital transitions (Forgatch et al., in press). Our own work, examining couples who later divorced, suggests that, especially for women in distant or hostile, conflicted marriages, depression is likely to decline following divorce, whereas antisocial behavior is likely to remain constant or to increase. Continued attachment to the ex-spouse is associated both with health problems and depression (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 1987). This connection, however, declines with repartnering and the formation of a close meaningful relationship (Hetherington et al., 1982; Forgatch et al., in press).

We spoke earlier of divorce, like death of a spouse, involving loss of a way of life. It also involves loss of aspects of the self sustained by that way of life (Silverman, 1988). Because of this, the early years of separation and divorce offer great opportunity for positive and negative change. In this early phase, separated and divorced men and women often complain of being disoriented, of not knowing who they are or who they want to be, and of behaving in ego alien ways. They speak of having "not me experiences" where previously rational, self-controlled individuals report such things as smearing dog feces on their ex-spouse's face, following them and peering into their bedroom windows, defacing their property, fantasizing and sometimes acting out violent impulses, or whining and begging for reconciliation. "I can't believe I did that" or "That wasn't really me" is repeatedly heard in interviews with divorcing adults. Many noncustodial fathers feel rootless, disoriented, shut out of regular contact with their children and nurture unrealistic fantasies of reconciliation. Others throw themselves into a frenzy of social activity and try to develop a more open, free-living persona.

Conventional women have more problems in adapting to their new life situation than do less conventional, more internally controlled, androgynous, or working women. Non-employed women in traditional marriages have often organized their identities around the achievements of their husbands and children. One said, "I used to be Mrs. John Jones, the bank manager's wife. Now I'm Mary Jones! Who is Mary Jones?" In spite of the problems with income, housing, inadequate childcare, loneliness, and limited resources and support encountered by many divorced women, our work shows that about 70%, in the long run, prefer their new life to an unsatisfying marriage. Most think that divorce and raising children alone have provided an experience of personal growth, albeit sometimes painful growth. Some of these women were competent, autonomous women before the divorce. Others, in coping with the demands of their new situation, discovered strengths, developed skills, and attained levels of individuation that might never have emerged if they had remained in the constraints of a dysfunctional marriage. It should be noted, however, that in comparison to married women, divorced women are overrepresented at both extremes of competence and adjustment. Some are found in a group with high self-esteem and few psychological problems who function ably in social situations, in the workplace, and in the family. Others seem permanently overwhelmed by the losses and changes in their lives, show little adequate coping behavior, and exhibit low self-esteem and multiple problems such as depression, antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and repeated, unsuccessful intimate relationships. Job training, continued education, and professional enhancement play

important roles not only in the economic, but also the psychological, well-being of women. Adequate childcare is critical in facilitating these activities (Burns, 1992). Although work satisfaction plays an important role in the self-esteem of divorced adults, most custodial mothers and fathers restrict their social, and to some extent, work activities, and organize their lives around providing and caring for their children. Adequacy in these roles is central to their self-esteem.

Repartnering is the single factor that contributes most to the life satisfaction of divorced men and women; however, it seems more critical to men. Divorced fathers are less likely than divorced mothers to show marked personal growth and individuation while they are single. Men show more positive development in the security of a marriage.

The significance for children of these psychological, emotional, and physical changes in parents is that, in the early years following divorce, children are encountering an altered parent at a time when they need stability in a rapidly changing life situation. A physically ill, emotionally disturbed, or preoccupied parent and a distressed, demanding, angry child may have difficulty giving each other support or solace. Over time, the well-being of the child is associated with the adjustment of the custodial parent, and this is largely an indirect path mediated by parenting behaviors. If parent distress, low self-esteem, depression, or antisocial behavior results in disrupted parenting, behavior problems in children increase (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Patterson & Bank, 1989; Forgatch et al., in press). If a disturbed parent is able to maintain authoritative qualities, such as responsiveness, warmth, firm control, monitoring, and communication, adverse effects on children are less likely to occur.

Editor's Note: References for this reading can be found in the original source.