Impact of Parental Divorce on Children’s and Adolescents’ Mental Health, Social Well-Being, and Romantic Competence

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Abstract

Millions of children and adolescents have experienced parental divorce in the past forty years. The effects of divorce on all facets of family are vast, immediate and often plagued with long-term consequences. Children and adolescents’ mental health, social well-being and romantic competence reflect both immediate and long-term effects that vary with the level of conflict and family stability, exemplified in many aspects of conflict theory. Pre-and post-divorce conflict and parental interaction are key to future development, well-being and competence levels in college students and adults. Future research in this area may examine the influence of chronic family instability and anxiety that influences differentiation and romantic competence. Longitudinal studies could be conducted to include long-term consequences of divorce that account for the social context in that divorce takes place.

Keywords: divorce, parents, marriage, conflict, children, adolescents, mental health, social, well-being, relationships, romance, competence
While Karl Marx remains the father of conflict theory, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Lewis Coser focused on interpersonal uses related to conflict. Specifically, Simmel added dimensions of love, ownership, valuing, and jealousy to the perspective of conflict in relationships and families (Sprey, 1999). Conflict and disagreements tend to be at the heart of romantic relationships. The way in which couples approach conflicts and particularly how well they are able to resolve both internal and external conflicts affects both the relationship’s functioning and stability (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Numerous studies have reported that couples who are unable to resolve daily conflicts have a higher likelihood of divorcing, tying into conflict theory (Carrere et al., 1992).

Conflict theorists make assumptions about human nature; they assume that the individual is self-oriented or focused on self-interests, sometimes even resorting to intrapersonal aggression (Smith & Hamon, 2012). The group dynamics in families are classified differently than the other groups one may belong to in other areas of life. Relationships in a family are by definition more intense because they are closer in proximity and generally have a longer history (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Marital conflict is oftentimes the most dramatic form of classified conflict in families because it is dyadic (Smith & Hamon, 2012). While families generally tolerate a higher degree of conflict than groups, a marital relationship-oriented conflict may oftentimes be concluded with divorce (Smith & Hamon, 2012). It takes two to make a relationship, and only one to end it. Conflict theory proposes stages that manifest themselves during divorce.

The importance of studying conflict lies in its value as a change agent in relationships throughout the family and the way it operates. Every time conflict is resolved, the social system within which the conflict arose is forever changed (Smith &
Marital conflict in a relationship ends either constructively or destructively; dissolution affects the family as a whole but does not end it (Smith & Hamon, 2012). Couples negotiate and bargain how to split possessions, but can also show aggression and appeasement to coerce each other. The effects of marital dissolution—ending either constructively or destructively—affect every member of the family, especially if the couple has children. This literature review aims at uncovering the widespread impact of parental divorce on children and adolescents’ coping abilities both immediately and in the future in many different areas.

The impact of divorce is often associated with feelings of disappointment, fear, resentment, and doubt (Hartman, Magalhães, & Mandich, 2011; Darlington, 2001). For children and adolescents, these emotions are often amplified and influence many different aspects of development, making these emotions determine how the children go on to feel, think, and act as adults. Broadly, the futures of children that come from a divorced home are contingent upon conflict level, quality of parenting, and basic needs that are met (Shulman, Zlotnik, Shachar-shapira, Connolly, & Bohr, 2012). The long-term effects of divorce on children’s lives are seen in competence level in romantic relationships and psychological distress as they transition into adulthood.

**Conflict Resolution/Recovery**

Much research with divorce and marriage identifies conflict as the single-most important aspect in determining the future psychosocial and emotional competence in the future of children and adolescents (Afifi, T. D., Afifi, W. A., & Coho, 2009; Ha, Overbeek, Lichtwarck-Aschoff, & Engels, 2013; Hartman, Magalhães & Mandich, 2011). Conflict resolution and recovery have shown that the ability to recoup from
conflict is of utmost importance in successful, healthy romantic relationships. The ways in which couples approach, handle, and resolve conflict in the relationship are determining factors for the stability and functioning of the relationship. Therefore, those that can resolve and recover from conflicts have a lesser chance of divorcing in the future. Levels of conflicts are shown to increase in relationships as adolescents become closer and achieve greater intimacy, which often occur during the transition into adulthood (Ha et al., 2013). Therefore, the approach and handling of conflict often dictates the longevity of romantic relationships (Ha et al., 2013).

**Parenting**

**Quality of Parenting**

When marriage comes to an end, the amount of pre and post-divorce conflict has more effect on a child’s behavior and cognitive processing than what is generally acknowledged (Darlington, 2001). As parents wade through their own surplus of emotions and settle into their new lives, the priorities that come with good parenting often take a backseat. Custody arrangements, reorganizing, and in most cases relocation leads to maladjustment for children as their parents are preoccupied with redefining their own lives (Darlington, 2001). This leads to the possibility of children acquiring feelings of abandonment, mistrust, disappointment, and fear (Darlington, 2001; Hartman et al., 2011). In turn, as children and adolescents make the transitions into the different states of their lives, they are not often given adequate emotional and psychological support to develop healthy and appropriate behaviors and thought processes (Darlington, 2001; Shulman et al., 2012).
When children feel secure in their relationships with their parents, they do not feel the need to seek outside affirmation and for someone to fill a parental role (Shulman et al., 2012; Darlington, 2001). With the implementation of effective parenting strategies pre- and post-divorce, children and adolescents are better equipped in a multitude of ways. Not only are they better enabled to develop both satisfying and interpersonal relationships, adolescents have reported “higher levels of mutuality” throughout relationships in general (Shulman et al., 2012; Hartman et al., 2011). In particular, perceived parental acceptance, structure, involvement, and guidance facilitate and fosters more competence in many areas of a child’s life (Shulman et al., 2012). Effective parenting can overrule the effects of divorce on children and adolescents, rendering long-term effects obsolete.

**Identification With a Parent**

Children tend to side with one of the parents throughout a time of conflict and despair often-occurring pre and post-parental divorce (Afifi et al., 2009; Hartman et al., 2011; Darlington, 2001). Often, children identify with their mothers; an increase is seen in adolescents’ dating behavior and social immersion as a result of a mother’s disclosure of the relationship between her and her ex-husband (Hartman et al., 2011; Darlington, 2001). Adoption of a mother’s negative attitudes and beliefs toward a divorce explain why children and adolescents seek romantic and social involvement, as they try to find someone outside of the family to fulfill their one or both of their mother’s or father’s role in their life. Therefore, the less negative information, attitudes, and beliefs the parents disclose, the less the susceptibility that a child/adolescent has to form unhealthy and deviant behaviors as well as siding with a parent.
In addition, identification with the mother leads to the adoption of maternal attitudes and beliefs toward relationships and the opposite sex (Shulman et al., 2012). The assumed attitudes and beliefs from mothers’ perspective impact adolescents’ take on marriage and relationships in general, which may cause them to become avoidant or overly involved in relationships. When mothers provide positive support of daughters’ experiences romantically, a daughter is more romantically competent (Shulman et al., 2012). As a result of this maternal support, daughters are shown to have more ability to handle and stability in romantic relationships as well as a greater maturity in opinions of romance (Shulman et al., 2012; Hartman et al., 2011).

**Interaction with Parents**

The quality of the relationship in general pre- and post-divorce between children and parents has been found to be detrimental to the child’s psychosocial and emotional conduct later in life (Hartman et al., 2011; Darlington, 2001; Afifi et al., 2009). Children and adolescents from divorced families described considerably poorer relations with both their mother and father that doubled more than half of the percentage that children and adolescents from intact families reported (Darlington, 2001). Children tend to feel as though they are caught in the middle of the parents’ conflict, which can lead to either avoidance of relationships with one or both parents, or siding with one parent. Research has shown that negative attitudes toward marriage are formed when children and adolescents are in this position (Afifi et al., 2009).

It is important to note that a level of emotional separation between children and either mother or father is common and an expected effect of divorce (Shulman et al., 2012). A good relationship between both parents and children/adolescents is found to be
associated with the children’s/adolescent’s better sense of well-being and competence as well as less susceptibility to deviant behaviors commonly associated with divorce. Moreover, it is becoming more frequently seen that children and adolescents are undergoing “parentification,” a term dubbed by Boszormenyinagy and Spark in 1973, which describes the assigning of parental roles and responsibilities to children and adolescents (Shulman et al., 2012). This type of transference in familial interaction is part of parental dysfunction that typically follows divorce. Frequently, children and adolescents’ assumed parentification leads them to pursue warmth and acceptance from outside of the family, which is particularly negative when it comes to romantic relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). Children and adolescents may subconsciously shape their behavior in relationships as a result of observed conflict and dysfunctional interactions between their parents (Shulman et al., 2012). Not only could this foster dependence on one or both of the romantically involved, but can lead to dysfunction in relationship’s emotional mutuality, and the ability to handle conflict.

**Custody**

Evaluating the best interests of children pre- and post-divorce is a very multifaceted task, sometimes clear-cut and other times ambiguous. In terms of keeping in contact and establishing residency, parents often find themselves amidst an array of conflict as they attempt to take into consideration their own wants and needs (or lack thereof) in addition to their children’s (Darlington, 2001). The current situation the child is in, as well as future well being, must be taken into account but oftentimes decisions made at one point in time do not foster future healthy child and family development (Darlington, 2001). From this, it can be concluded that the best type of custody
agreement would be malleable and subject to change with ongoing life circumstances. Consequently, college students generally acknowledge how difficult it was for them as they went through custody agreements post-divorce (Short, 2002). Reflecting on their adjustment difficulties, it has made them more aware of what they do not want to put their future children through. It is important to note that custody agreements could impose socioeconomic status (SES) difficulties on children as well, which further effects how well they fare in adulthood with their own SES (Sun & Li, 2008).

**Romantic Relationships**

**Romantic Relationship Beliefs/Attitudes**

The establishment of romantic relationships and competence is viewed as a major developmental undertaking for adolescents (Shulman et al., 2012). As children shift into adolescence, the way they perceive romantic and intimate relationships is influenced by the relationship stability and functioning of their parents. However, it is important to note that not all children and adolescents are affected in the same way by the events following a parental divorce. Specifically in cases of divorce, the conflict level post-divorce was correlated with adolescents’ more negative view of marriage and relationships (Hartman et al., 2011). The ability to handle and recover from conflict within the family also influence and contribute to this negative belief that children of divorce grow to hold. It is also found that adults that experienced divorce in their childhood are determined not to repeat this pattern. They report specific strategies to achieve this in Darlington’s study that include taking relationships slowly as opposed to rushing into them (2001) and making sure they are financially secure before entering into marriage. In a relationship or not, those determined not to fall into the pattern of divorce expressed that developing a
strong sense of self-awareness was another very important factor in achieving healthy relationships (Darlington, 2001).

Research has found that adolescents’ attitudes toward premarital sex tend to be more permissive following parents’ divorce (Hartman et al., 2011). In a vast majority of cases, parental monitoring diminishes during and following a divorce, frequently leading to a greater chance of adolescents partaking in sexual behavior at an earlier age, often due to parentification (Shulman et al., 2012). In addition, a significant difference is noted between those coming from intact families and the offspring of divorced parents concerning the age when adolescents become sexually active. Most young people from divorced families become and engaging in sexually active at a younger age, having more partners, reporting less intimate relationships toward romantic partners, and having significantly shorter relationships than those whose parents did not divorce (Mahl, 2001).

It is interesting to note how the trend in behavior of sexually deviant adolescents is explained in comparison to their same age counterparts. According to research by Mahl (2001), this subgroup of adolescents view sex as a way to avoid conflict in romantic relationships. Moreover, these adolescents chose sex as a way to feel intimate with and show their commitment to their partner (Mahl, 2001).

Findings from a study conducted by Shulman et al. (2012) revealed that adolescent girls coming from families of divorce were less able to be romantically competent (2012). This was measured through the girls’ behavior and attitudes toward, and their skill in handling romantic relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). The same level of romantic competence is not achieved by adolescent girls coming from divorced homes in comparison to adolescent girls coming from intact homes (Shulman et al., 2012).
Impact of Divorce on Avoidance of Intimacy

More than one million children and adolescents have experienced parental divorce since the mid-1970’s (Morris & West, 2001). Based on experience in dealing with parental divorce, most offspring of non-intact families have developed a concrete view of relationship difficulties (Hartman et al., 2011; Shulman et al., 2012). Children and adolescents in particular hold sensitivity to strains accompanying relationships of all kinds, and seem to be coherent and confident in romantic relationships even when their perceptions are less mature than those coming from intact families (Shulman et al., 2012). Further, a lack of effective communication contributes to avoidance of intimacy, both a common consequence of divorce and a learned behavior (Mullett & Stolberg, 2002).

It is often found that those coming from a disrupted and maladjusted home life experience a great deal of caution when it comes to their romantic relationships (Mahl, 2001; Shulman et al., 2012). Children and adolescents that experience divorce in their childhood often hold a negative perspective of the world and their relation to it (Mahl, 2001; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). Mahl (2001) found most offspring of non-intact families to be timid when it comes to intimacy and love in addition to fearing rejection if they become intimate on a deep level. Therefore, the experience of a parental divorce in childhood or adolescence leaves lasting effects on both the levels and avoidance of intimacy in romantic relationships.

Socioeconomic Status

Often, one or both parent’s lives post-divorce are plagued with SES consequences. Typically after a divorce, the mother is at a monetary deficit, however, the SES consequences on the offspring of divorce affect both sexes of children (Sun & Li,
Findings show that growing up with undesirable socioeconomic conditions in a post-divorce family doubles the chance of adults from divorced families not attaining high SES (Sun & Li, 2008). Lower socioeconomic status has been associated with children’s and adolescents’ maladjustment to their parents’ divorce and therefore a negative consequence of divorce (Sun & Li, 2008). Generally, children and adolescents that grow up in a household that has a low SES receive less education, bring in less income, and hold less prestigious careers (Sun & Li, 2008). Therefore, the income adjustment of a family post-divorce may lead to future career, educational, and financial consequences for children and adolescents due to one or both parents assuming a low SES. A lack of parental resources both financially and socially negatively effects children’s adjustment and contributes to a wide array of issues later in life (Sun & Li, 2008).

**Effect of Childhood Divorce on College Students**

Young people in college that experienced divorce in their childhood were found to hold more favorable beliefs toward divorce than those from intact families (Short, 2002). However, their beliefs on marriage and “value of family life” were not swayed or dictated by that of their parents and remained generally optimistic in their ideas of committed relationships (Darlington, 2001). Darlington (2001) found that students hold more favorable attitudes toward alternative family forms in comparison to traditional. Overall, most college students view their parents’ divorce objectively, a source of enlightenment. Experiencing a childhood divorce, most college students can say that they have become more aware of the wants and needs, as well as the benefits and disadvantages of marriage.
and relationships. Acknowledgement of conflict and what can go wrong is another important point that students may have a better idea of than those from intact families.

While college students’ ideas of marriage and relationships seem to be aligned with a healthy representation, those whom come from divorced families are more susceptible to becoming antisocial and depressive, and having high anxiety and emotional distress as well as engaging in deviant behavior (Short, 2002; Mullett & Stolberg, 2002). This may reflect that they have acquired development and adjustment issues that become present in the transition to collegiate studies and differentiation emotionally and physically from their family. In addition to this, the SES status of their parents may lead to a decrease in financial aid from their families, which could place addition mental strain on the students (Short, 2002; Darlington, 2001). Divorce, in all reality, may become a chronic strain that extends far beyond young adulthood for some children and adolescents that come from divorced homes.

Future Outcomes

It is found that the effects of divorce on a child last well into adulthood, sometimes expanding across the entire lifespan (Shulman et al., 2012). In particular, social and intimate relational aspects are impacted the most in adulthood. Adolescents and children that experienced divorce in their childhood tend to postpone deeply committed relationships and marriage, finding it difficult to achieve commitment in relationships (Shulman et al., 2012). This in turn can lead to personal marital disbanding, thus making the experienced parental divorce a future determinate of relational identity throughout the lifespan. In addition, as a result of parental divorce, there has been an increase in the amount of cohabitating couples that remain unmarried (Fergusson,
McLeod, & Horwood, 2014). Further, the ability to handle disagreements interpersonal strains declines, a lasting effect of divorce that is reflected at nearly any age (Shulman et al., 2012).

Many of the negative emotions, attitudes, and beliefs that children and adolescents assume concerning the non-intact family post-divorce persist over time. Studies by Darlington (2001) reveal that about five years after divorce, children and adolescents may undergo a re-evaluation of attitudes and beliefs. As a result of this re-evaluation, children and adolescents may hold a less-disapproving attitude toward the divorce and/or parent(s) (Darlington, 2001). Additionally, they may make effort to engage in communication or contact with those estranged during the divorce, and attempt to gain a better comprehension of why the divorce happened (Darlington, 2001; Shulman et al., 2012). Further, studies ten years post-divorce reveal that nearly all anger and negative emotion directed at one or both parents immediately following divorce has completely dispersed (Darlington, 2001).

**Positive Outcomes**

Though not as widely focused on as the negative, there are positive outcomes for children when it comes to divorce (Shulman et al., 2012). These are generally found in cases when there is an abnormal amount of conflict in a marriage when the family is still intact (Ha et al., 2013). A tremendous amount of conflict pre-divorce may lead to a greater increase in maladjustment and unhealthy behaviors in children’s and adolescents’ futures than the actual divorce (Ha et al., 2013). Divorce then is looked upon not as an “out”, but as a positive and healthy way to lessen or remove entirely the conflict in a family that can lead to social, mental, and emotional instability for children. Better
communication can also be found when a marriage with high conflict ends, as both parents get more time and space to communicate without the level of conflict experienced in the intact household (Ha et al., 2013).

Romantic competence as a negative effect of divorce only goes as far as the parental interaction with the children/adolescents pre- and post-divorce (Shulman et al., 2012; Hartman et al., 2011; Darlington, 2001; Afifi et al., 2009). As stated before, it is found that mothers’ support of daughters’ romantic capabilities were directly correlated with daughters’ “romantic competence above and beyond the effect of divorce,” (Shulman et al., 2012). It may be inferred that adolescents’ ability to create and function in healthy relationships are not hindered by divorce unless one or both parents disclose negative attitudes and information toward relationships and marriage as a result of the parental divorce. Adults whom experienced parental divorce in childhood or adolescence and viewed the divorce as resulting in positive changes (e.g. lesser/resolved conflict), tended to perceive and analyze their parents’ relationship for negative qualities they actively avoid in their own relationships. Children and adolescents that see the event of remarriage as having a positive effect on them and the family have a positive and healthy model for relationships (Mahl, 2001).

For a majority of college students, studies of family life revealed that perceived ideas and values of family were not impacted by parental divorce (Darlington, 2001). In conjunction, Darlington’s (2001) studies revealed college students’ attitudes and beliefs toward marriage and commitment were not proven hindered by parents’ decision to divorce. Those who have experienced a parental divorce in childhood may be better equipped with the understanding that relationships continually require hard-work and
maintenance, and also strongly value a sense of self-awareness and efficacy.

Additionally, adolescents and college students are generally more idealistic toward relationships and attempt to concentrate on the development of necessary skills in building healthy relationships (Darlington, 2001; Short, 2002). Further, adult children of parental divorce were determined to change the pattern of divorce in their families. Both Darlington’s (2001) and Short’s (2002) studies bring about the conclusion that divorce can be looked upon in a positive light, not only promoting self-efficacy (e.g. confidence, self-awareness) but also empathy and awareness of the effects of divorce they experienced that they do not want to subject their own kids to in the future.

**Conclusion**

In sum, a vast amount of research studies have disclosed the effects of parental divorce experienced during childhood or adolescence that have both immediate and long-term consequences. Marx, Webber, Simmel, and Coser’s contributions to conflict theory exemplify how tremendous and long-lasting the effects of parental divorce can be for children and adolescents. Research thus far on parental divorce and its effects on children and adolescents has been limited by focus of the negative consequences, however, it is becoming more prevalent that researchers are investigating positive outcomes and aspects post-divorce. Ultimately, conflict resolution and familial interaction are the key factors that decidedly shape children’s and adolescents’ development mentally, socially, relationally, and economically. Future research should focus on interventions and restructuring adolescents’ and adults’ [of parental divorce] negative views, attitudes, and beliefs about marriage, commitment, and family life.
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EXAMPLE (Seidel et al., 2001; Jant et al., 2012)