

The Influence of Divorce on Children

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ABSTRACT. This paper is a review of children's postdivorce adjustment in relation to individual, familial, social and cultural contingencies. A systems perspective is adopted with children's adjustment being viewed as a dynamic ongoing process and causation perceived as circular. Research, interventive and treatment implications are discussed in this framework. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: getinfo@haworthpressinc.com <Website: <http://www.haworthpressinc.com>>*]

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INTRODUCTION

Amongst the family stressors which may result in severe coping and adjustment problems in children and adolescents, the phenomenon of parental divorce has gained increasing attention over the years. Today, in fact, it is one of the most frequently researched areas of family stress (Levin, 1997). Recent research shows that divorce affects both coping strategies and adjustment in children. Parental divorce is associated with poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency, recidivism, substance abuse, sexual precocity, depression, and suicidal behavior (Rogers, 1996), as well as changes in the frequency and effectiveness of coping strategies as a function of time from divorce (Kurtz, 1995).

It is estimated that in the United States almost one out of every two couples (47.5%) eventually divorce. The rate of divorce went up from

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2.1 cases per 1000 inhabitants in 1958, to a record of 5.3 cases per thousand inhabitants at the beginning of the 1980s (U.S. Department of Commerce: Bureau of Census, 1995). It is also estimated that between 40% and 50% of children born in the 1980s will experience the divorce of their parents before reaching age 18 (Glick & Lin, 1986; Hernandez, 1988). While the rate of divorce has stabilized and even decreased somewhat during the 1980s and early 1990s to 4.6 per 1000 inhabitants in 1993, researchers do not expect that it will decrease significantly in the years to come (Grych & Fincham, 1990; Forehand, Neighbors, Devine, D., & Armistead).

In other western industrialized nations there has also been a considerable rise in divorce rates in the last few decades. For example, while the incidence per 1000 inhabitants in the 1980s was 3.3 in the former Soviet Union, 2.9 in the United Kingdom and 2.5 in Sweden, these figures rose to 4.6 in the former Soviet Union in 1994, 3.1 in the United Kingdom in 1993, and 2.6 in Sweden in 1995. Increasing trends in divorce rates were also registered in Germany, Denmark, Holland and Switzerland (United Nations, 1997).

While Israeli society attributes great importance to family values, or what has been termed "familism" (Peres & Katz, 1991; Shamgar-Handelman & Bar-Yosef, 1991) and divorce rates are relatively low, the incidence of divorce per 1000 inhabitants shows a rising trend from 1.1 per 1000 from 1975-79, 1.3 per 1000 from 1985-89, 1.5 from 1990-94, and a record 1.8 per 1000 in the year 1995. Correspondingly the number of Jewish children in Israel experiencing a parental divorce increased 40.2% from 1985 to 1992 (Central Bureau of Statistics, 1996).

DIVORCE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The increasing incidence of divorce has caused educators, clinicians, and social scientists to invest considerable attention to the nature of the divorce experience and its impact on families. The divorce literature of the last few decades reflects a diversity of theoretical and research approaches, being uneven in its usefulness. Clinicians have focused on patient samples, emphasizing pathology rather than positive coping and adjustment. They often employ psychodynamic models which stress the influence of early disturbed parental relationships on later child development. Psychoanalytic approaches, for example, propose that disruptive parental relations in divorce, such as father-absence,

may affect the later psychosexual development of the child (Mott, Kowaleskijones, & Menaghan, E.G., 1997). Social science researchers, particularly developmental psychologists, while studying nonclinical populations, have also perceived children's poor divorce adjustment to be a result of early disruptive parent-child interactions. Cognitive developmental theories, for example, contend that young children's limited cognitive capacities result in poor understanding of the meaning and implications of divorce events, which in turn may precipitate self-blame, separation anxiety and reconciliation fantasies leading to later maladjustment.

The above theories stress the divorce event, emphasizing linear notions of causality, with early disturbed parental relationships viewed as profoundly affecting subsequent development. This perspective has profound importance for clinicians and researchers. Clinicians adopting this approach may view pathology as residing in the individual and use techniques such as psychodynamic or behavioral therapy designed to overcome the negative effects of divorce events occurring in the child's early socialization. Similarly, researchers who treat divorce as a central event affecting later development, often employ cross-sectional designs to measure the effects of the early divorce experience on different age groups at observation, without taking into account intervening postdivorce events which also affect development. By adopting such a static linear perspective, practitioners, educators, and researchers may be ignoring changing individual capacities and environmental influences affecting the adjustment process over time.

Kurdek (1981), in contrast, has described children's and parents' divorce adjustment as an ongoing dynamic process occurring in an expanded interpersonal context, which in addition to encompassing the interaction between the individual child and parents at the time of divorce, observes the effects of changing familial, social and cultural contexts on children's divorce adjustment. In this expanded systems framework (Bowen, 1978), changing postdivorce environmental influences like postdivorce family interaction, the extended family and nonfamilial social support systems, environmental stability, and evolving cultural attitudes are perceived as having a significant effect on long-term adjustment, modifying the acute reactions to divorce that disrupted parent-child interactions caused in the short-term.

Causation is viewed as being circular (Minuchin, 1985) with cause and effect relations changing over time. Any given outcome can result

from multiple sources, with children's postdivorce adjustment being associated with a number of factors that may be considered both causes and effects of individual, family and sociocultural restructuring. For example, the child may not only be a victim affected by parental turmoil and conflict, but may also learn to be manipulative and precipitate conflict in divisive parents. Social policy may not only affect families and individuals, but changing individual and family norms, e.g., increased divorce rates, may cause a change in social policies towards families of divorce.

The present article intends to look at recent literature related to children's divorce adjustment, utilizing a hierarchically nested systems approach such as that employed by Kurdek (1981). Individual, familial, social and cultural contexts of development and the interaction between these contexts will be examined in describing adjustment. Both clinical observations and empirical research in educational, home and other settings will be analyzed and suggestions for researchers and practitioners will be offered.

Individual Context

Parental separation and divorce have been shown to be transitory stressors, precipitating short-term crises for most children—the most acute responses diminishing substantially within the first six months to a year after separation (Kelly, 1988a; Waldren, Ching, & Fair, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The divorce experience is generally accompanied by stress for children since they have to cope with situational circumstances such as changes in residence and school, loss of friends and relatives, diminished economic resources and parental conflicts regarding visitation and custody. The reactions of these children to divorce have been compared to those of children who have undergone traumatic events such as a parental homicide, kidnapping or a natural disaster, and they have displayed posttraumatic syndromes including such reactions as denial, shame, anxiety, pessimism and depression, guilt and recurrent intrusive recollections of the traumatic events (Dreman, 1991). These short-term crisis-linked reactions are largely influenced by individual variables such as age, sex-type, and temperament which affect the child's cognitive understanding, vulnerability and psychological capacity to cope with the traumatic events of divorce.

Age at divorce. Age-related developmental limitations may affect children's short-term reactions to divorce. Preschool children's responses are mediated by limited cognitive and social competencies, their parental dependency, and their restriction to the home environment (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagan, & Anderson, 1989). Limited cognitive development prevents accurate interpretation of events immediately after divorce including their own role in the divorce process, faulty perceptions of motives and feelings of parents as well as possible outcomes. Thus children may blame themselves for the divorce, fear abandonment by both parents, and harbor reconciliation fantasies (Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). Research shows that children of divorcing parents, who experience self-blame, had lower perceived competence, more psychological symptoms and more behavior problems (Healy, Stewart, & Copeland, 1993). Older children and adolescents also experience pain and anger, but have the cognitive maturity to understand the reasons for divorce, and can resolve loyalty conflicts. Their social-cognitive development also permits them to assess and cope with larger social changes such as lowered income or residential relocation, as well as to take advantage of extrafamilial support systems (Hetherington et al., 1989).

Findings with regard to long-term reactions of different age groups at the time of divorce are less certain. Some investigators have found that younger children, under six years of age, show poorer adjustment than older children (Furstenberg & Allison, 1985; Hetherington, 1972), others have found no effect (Power, Ash, Schoenberg, & Sorey, 1974), and still others have found more problems among children who were older at divorce (Gibson, 1969; Wallerstein, 1984, 1985). Emery (1988) suggests that these inconclusive results may be due to the fact that three temporal variables, age at the time of divorce, time since divorce and age at observation are confounded. This occurs since if any two of these variables are fixed, the third is automatically determined. To illustrate, one might investigate the long-term effects of age at divorce by observing a group of children currently the same age, e.g., 12 years, where age at divorce in one group was less than six years (the early-divorce group) and for the other group, over six years of age (the late-divorce group). If the early-divorce group fares better it might be concluded that long-term adjustment is better in children who were younger at the time of divorce. Such a conclusion is premature, however, since by stipulating age at the time of divorce and at

observation, the time since divorce is automatically determined, being greater for the early than the late divorce group. Since research shows that children's adjustment improves as time since divorce increases (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982), the better long-term adjustment of the early divorce group may in part be attributable to the greater time elapsed since divorce in this group.

Another illustration of temporal confounding is found in a longitudinal study in California (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Wallerstein, 1984, 1985; Wallerstein et al., 1988). While in the short-term children under six years adjusted worse than children who were older at the time of divorce, a ten-year follow-up showed that the younger children showed better long-term adjustment. In the follow-up, these younger children retained few memories of the parental conflict and looked forward to marriage and family, while the older children had vivid memories and felt burdened by the divorce event, with many having difficulties in heterosexual relations and marriage. Wallerstein concluded that the same cognitive immaturity of the young children, which had resulted in severe short-term reactions, may have promoted long-term adjustments since these children did not retain vivid memories of the earlier period of marital turmoil and divorce. These conclusions must be treated with caution, however, since age at separation of the two groups was established at the outset of the study and time since divorce was held constant (10 years), resulting in two different age groups at follow-up. The older group, at the time of follow-up, were mainly in their twenties, while the younger group consisted of young adolescents and teenagers. Group-related developmental differences might explain these findings since the older group may have encountered more problems in the realm of heterosexual relationships—these issues being more salient for them than the younger group.

The research of Wallerstein and her colleagues suffers not only from temporal confounds and failure to employ control groups of intact families, but also from the fact that it is of a mainly descriptive, clinical, and nonquantitative nature employing a small nonrepresentative sample of 60 divorced families from an affluent community in Northern California. Furstenberg and Allison (1985), in contrast, analyzed adjustment data from the National Survey of Children, which employed a large nationally representative sample of 2,258 children from both intact and disrupted families. This analysis was one of the few attempts to untangle the temporal confounds described earlier.

When this was done it was conclusively shown that children who were younger at the time of divorce actually displayed poorer long-term adjustment, although as time elapsed from divorce, adjustment improved in all age groups examined as compared to those of children in comparable intact families.

Gender. Boys are more exposed to parental conflict (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Kline, Johnston, & Tschann, 1991), are more likely to imitate it (Hetherington et al., 1982), and are more negatively influenced by such conflict than girls (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1982; Rutter, 1970). These differences in vulnerability are most apparent immediately after separation, tending to disappear as adolescence is approached (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978). One explanation offered is that spousal conflict, which affects boys more adversely, is greatest in the immediate postdivorce period. In addition, the boys' already difficult situation is exacerbated by difficulties in revealing feelings and soliciting support from others (Hetherington, 1989), as well as by the fact that custody is usually assigned to mothers, with boys initially reacting more negatively to the loss of daily contact with fathers than girls (Emery, Hetherington, & DiLalla, 1985; Kelly, 1981; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Warshack & Santrock, 1983). Social perceptions also negatively affect boys' immediate adjustment since custodial mothers often identify sons with their ex-spouse, causing problematic mother-son interaction (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). These problematic mother-son interactions result in the persistence of behavioral problems in boys even several years after the divorce event (Hetherington et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1987).

Temperament. Children responding adversely to divorce, have been described by their mothers as being temperamentally difficult infants, with trouble adapting to new situations (Hetherington et al., 1978). Rutter (1987) noted that this increased vulnerability is in part attributable to the interaction with the parent—these children are more likely to be both the target and elicitor of aversive responses by the parent in times of stress. The temperamentally difficult child is also less able to cope with their parent's aversive behavior. Block, Block, and Gjerde (1988) suggest that children with personality and behavior problems may not only be more vulnerable to their parents' divorce, but are also more likely to have parents who later divorce. This supports the hypothesis of

circular causation which postulates that children are not only victims of parental conflict, but may also exacerbate it through negative behavior.

In summary, individual variables may affect children's ability to understand divorce events (e.g., age at divorce), their vulnerability to divorce turmoil (e.g., sex-type), and their psychological capacity to deal with the divorce (e.g., temperament). Such individual contingencies often result in severe short-term reactions to the traumatic events of divorce.

Family Context

Parental relationships. Recent research indicates that marital conflicts are stressful for children, increasing their aggression, particularly in regard to externalizing disorders (Cummings, 1994). Positive adjustment in children in both divorced and intact families may be related to the balance between parental cooperation and conflict, as well as the conflict resolution styles utilized by parents. These interpersonal familial relations may be more important than family structure in predicting children's adjustment (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989; Hetherington et al., 1989; Hetherington, 1988).

Kelly (1988a) has noted that contrary to prevalent stereotypes that the contemporary divorcing family is characterized by conflict, poor communication, and lack of cooperation, there is evidence of considerable variation in marriages that end in divorce. Such variation in predivorce marital relations may differentially influence the child's psychological capability for coping and adjusting to divorce, as may the postdivorce parental relationship history. Research shows, for example, that while some marriages ending in divorce are characterized in the predivorce period by intense marital conflict including frequent child-related conflict, as well as poor communication, a substantial number of marriages do not exhibit these patterns (Kelly, 1988b). Many couples decide to divorce for reasons such as gradual loss of love, diminished mutual regard and divergence in life styles rather than conflict and dissension. Empirical studies have found that while one-half of divorcing couples reported frequent and intense conflict, 25% to 30% reported either minimal or no conflict in the two years preceding separation (Kelly, 1982; Kelly, Gigy, & Hausman, 1988a; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In addition, divorce by removing parents out of a conflictual situation may contribute to an improvement in their parenting. Heinick, Guthrie, and Ruth (1997) found, for example, that

couples with an unsatisfactory marriage from late pregnancy through the first two years of their newborn infant's life displayed increased parental responsiveness to the needs of their child after divorce.

Even when conflict levels are high, however, there is evidence that divorcing parents report significantly less child-specific conflict than marital conflict and significantly better parental cooperation at separation than overall levels of cooperation (Kelly et al., 1988). While they rated marital communication as poor, the adequacy of their communication regarding children in the postdivorce period was perceived to be better, with 38% reporting communicating "well" or "very well" with their children and 67% reporting "adequate" communication. These findings suggest that following divorce, spouses often succeed in separating between their parenting and their marital relationship.

A carefully designed study found that postdivorce parental cooperation as well as positive styles of conflict management promoting negotiation and compromise, predict good socioemotional adjustment in children in divorced, as well as in intact, families (Camara & Resnick, 1988, 1989). In these circumstances children are more likely to engage in positive peer play behavior and had higher levels of self-esteem regardless of parental conflict levels. These findings suggest that parents who engage in cooperative parenting on such issues as visitation, discipline, and family routines, as well as constructively resolve their differences, contribute to children's positive divorce adjustment, even when high levels of conflict over other issues exist.

In view of the empirical findings presented, clinicians, dealing with couples undergoing separation or divorce, or experiencing difficulties in the postdivorce family, might consider ways of maximizing parental cooperation. For example, child-related conflict might be a more important focus of clinical intervention than general spousal hostility, since it is particularly damaging to parental cooperation and ultimately to children's adjustment. Attempts might also be made to assist parents in their conflict management skills by encouraging the use of negotiation and compromise.

The absence of parental conflict and/or parental attachment postdivorce may also be problematic for children of divorce. Futterman (1980), for example, in a clinical study found a subgroup of children whose parents had undergone a "civilized divorce." These children later displayed a variety of symptoms including aggression, social problems, depression, anxiety, psychosomatic disorders and declines

in academic performance. It was hypothesized that avoidance of conflict and overt hostility by parents in the predivorce period may have prevented an opportunity to work through and understand these family conflicts and feelings. This resulted in confusion in these children who could not understand why their "friendly" parents had divorced. Supporting this hypothesis was the high incidence of reunion fantasies found in these children. In therapy, the family was encouraged to talk about these unresolved divorce issues, including what the marriage was like, why the divorce occurred and how it was handled.

Moderate conflict levels may be a contributing factor in helping divorcing couples to disengage and start a new life. Such an "emotional divorce" (Herz Brown, 1988) should facilitate parental contact based on child-related concerns rather than pseudomutuality resulting from archaic emotional attachments. In support of this is research which shows that moderate conflict, accompanied by conflict resolution involving negotiation and compromise, contributes positively to children's postdivorce adjustment (Camara & Resnick, 1989).

There are few studies which examine the effects of parental conflict on children both before and after divorce. An exception is a study done by Block, Block, and Gjerde (1986) who studied the personalities of a heterogeneous sample of children from intact families beginning at age three—the family status being obtained again at age 14 to 15 years. Earlier records showed that boys from families which had subsequently divorced, had poorer control as early as 11 years prior to separation as compared to boys in continually intact families. Girls were found to be less affected. Block et al. concluded that disturbed behaviors previously thought to be a result of the divorce event may be present long before the marital disruption. They *presumed* that this disturbed behavior in boys was caused by marital conflict. However, since the relation between marital conflict and children's adjustment was not specifically investigated, the above interpretation has to be treated with caution.

A recent longitudinal study (Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993), however, showed that neither boys nor girls displayed more problematic behavior prior to parental separation, although the boys had more trouble after divorce. Parents of to-be-divorced families reported more difficulties in childcare practices utilized with boys before divorce than did parents of continually intact families. Hence, one possible explanation for postdivorce adjustment being poorer in boys is that they are ex-

posed to poor childcaring practices in the predivorce period. This fact, combined with father absence and poorer discipline in the maternal custody postdivorce situation, results in boys' poorer adjustment.

Parent-child relationships. Parent-child relationships may change significantly from pre- to postdivorce because of the new realities caused by divorce events. Divorcing parents are characterized by euphoria and optimism, alternating with anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Hetherington et al., 1989). Research shows that divorce hampers the immunologic system, making parents more disease vulnerable (Kiecolt-Glaser, Fisher, Ogrocki, Stout, Speicher, & Glaser, 1987). Thus, divorce stress places these parents at risk for both psychological and physical dysfunction. Children may be faced with angry, unstable and vulnerable parents when they need stability and parental strength in their changing and often chaotic life situation. The process is circular since a vulnerable parent combined with a distressed, demanding, noncompliant child may have difficulty giving each other support or solace (Hetherington et al., 1989). Supporting this contention is recent research which shows that a positive parent-child relationship can ameliorate the negative effects of divorce for both parents and children (Hines, 1997). On the other hand, negative parental emotions such as anger may adversely affect parent-child interaction and adjustment in children of divorce as was evidenced in several recent studies conducted in Israel (Dreman & Aldor, 1994; Dreman & Tsemach, in press; Dreman, Spielberger, & Darzi, 1997; Dreman, Spielberger, & Fried, in press).

Observations suggest that immediately following divorce some mothers become overly permissive and emotionally dependent on their children because of guilt, depression, and the absence of a supportive partner (Emery, 1988). This may occur at a time when children, particularly preadolescent children, need consistency, parental limit-setting and support in order to protect their sense of security in a changing postdivorce environment. What is often needed most in this situation is "authoritative parenting" (Baumrind, 1971; Maccoby & Martin, 1983), i.e., discipline combined with affection and love. Such child rearing practices have been found to be significantly related to postdivorce academic competence and good social relations with peers (Guidubaldi et al., 1986).

Empirical evidence confirming these clinical observations showed that the competence of parents with four-year-old children diminished

in the first year postdivorce, parents being preoccupied with their own emotional turmoil and unable to respond to their children's needs, as compared to parents of children in remarried and intact families (Hetherington et al., 1978; Hetherington et al., 1982). The divorced parents were less consistent, exercised poorer control with their children, communicated less effectively and were less affectionate than were parents in intact families. Hence, the compliance of these children was low when divorce first occurred, although it subsequently increased. At the six-year follow-up, however, they were less compliant than children in intact families.

These changes may reflect changes in parent-child interaction as well as in the child's developmental level. Thus parental problems and poor control were more evident in the first year following divorce, perhaps contributing to low initial compliance, but by two years the mothers were found to be more consistent and in better control, resulting in increased compliance. At six years these children were approaching adolescence, which may in itself explain the decreased compliance in this period. In support of this contention are findings which show that custodial mothers exert relatively low control over their adolescent children (Amato, 1987; Dornbusch, Carlsmith, Bushwall, Ritter, Leiderman, Hastorf, & Gross, 1985).

Weiss (1979) has noted that children in families of divorce "grow up faster" than those in two-parent families. While early autonomy in preadolescents and adolescents may be positive, it may also lead to poor adjustment if developmental needs are ignored and children feel overwhelmed and resentful about lack of parental support. In the six-year follow-up reported earlier (Hetherington et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1987), children who were now preadolescents were more independent and had more power in decision-making than children in intact families, supporting the "growing up faster" hypothesis. However, while in some cases this resulted in egalitarian, mutually supportive relations, in others, especially where emotional demands or responsibilities required were inappropriate, beyond the child's capacities, or interfered with normal routine, resentment, rebellion and behavior problems followed (Hetherington et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1987).

Postdivorce family structure. Family cohesiveness (sense of togetherness) and adaptability (flexibility) may be related to children's divorce adjustment. In a recent study, conducted in Israel, it was found

that divorced mothers, with few exceptions, reported that their adolescent children had the fewest behavior problems when they perceived family cohesion and flexibility as high and the most behavioral problems when they perceived these levels as low, as predicted (Dreman & Ronen-Eliav, 1997). In contrast, children with mothers who perceived high family cohesion or adaptability reported the most behavioral problems. These results were explained on the basis of differential perceptual biases in parents and children. These investigators hypothesized that adolescent children may require clear family boundaries and role stability to promote adjustment, whereas their mothers may project their positive or negative emotional state, as reflected in their positive ratings of cohesion or adaptability, on their assessments of children's behavior problems.

In another study conducted in Israel it was found that high state-anger in divorced mothers was associated with fewer behavior problems in sons, but more problems in daughters (Dreman, Spielberger, & Fried, 1997). It was hypothesized that high state-anger may be associated with more maternal assertiveness, resulting in fewer behavior problems in boys. More behavior problems in daughters at higher levels of maternal state-anger, however, is associated with empathy and imitation of mothers' feelings. These investigators pointed out that different family members perceive and are influenced by similar family environments in a different fashion as was the case in the earlier study of Dreman and Ronen-Eliav (1997). The gender differences reported in the present study may also reflect the fact that male sons, in the custody of their divorced mother, may need more maternal assertion to make up for the missing father figure (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Daughters, on the other hand, tend to empathize and identify more with the mothers' *internal* feelings resulting in more behavioral problems for daughters whose mothers report high levels of state-anger.

Custodial fathers generally report better family and child adjustment than custodial mothers, at least in the short-term, after divorce (Ambert, 1982, 1984; Furstenberg, 1988). Hetherington et al. (1989) suggested that the overall better adjustment in the paternal custody situation may be due to the fact that these fathers have fewer financial worries, more available support systems and are more likely to be awarded custody of older children than are custodial mothers. Custodial fathers may also constitute

a select sample with exceptionally good parent-child relations before divorce, thus resulting in their obtaining custody.

Another possible explanation for the better adjustment differential reported in the paternal custody situation is based on dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) which postulates that if, after a difficult decision, adverse events threaten it, cognitive dissonance will be precipitated. Dissonance will be reduced via cognitive-emotional distortion of objective realities which serve to justify the decision. A father's decision to obtain custody is usually more difficult than a mother's since sole parenting is considered an out-of-role task for men and arduous legal proceedings are often involved in paternal custody rulings. This decision-making process may be strongly dissonant with the awareness of poor postdivorce parenting by fathers, with dissonance reduced via the father's denial of difficulties as expressed in relatively high ratings of parental competence and/or children's adjustment.

Supporting this hypothesis were studies which showed that custodial fathers reported better adjustment than custodial mothers in the immediate postdivorce period (Ambert, 1982), and that fathers who actively fought for custody reported better parent-child relationships than those who negotiated for custody or were abandoned by their wives, respectively (Risman, 1986). Hence, the more difficult the decision-making process, the more positively do custodial fathers rate competence, in accordance with the tenets of dissonance theory. In the Ambert study children in paternal custody were also rated by objective observers as displaying more positive adjustment. This suggests that dissonance reduction, including denial of adverse divorce realities, may contribute to *actual* adjustment in the short-term. In this regard, a parent's perceived sense of competence in the postdivorce situation has been found to be positively related to his children's adjustment (Kannoy, Korrel, Cunningham, White, & Adams, 1984; Pett, 1982) and this may in part explain Ambert's findings. In addition, children in paternal custody verbalized appreciation of their fathers, while those in maternal custody rarely did so (Ambert, 1982). Also, friends and relatives tend to support custodial fathers more than custodial mothers (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978) since they are perceived as needier in their out-of-role function as a sole parent than are mothers. These factors could also contribute to children's positive postdivorce adjustment in the paternal custody family.

While denial of postdivorce realities may help a parent to maintain his or her sense of parental competence in the short-term, continuing denial, accompanied by poor reality testing may ultimately result in poor long-term adjustment in children. Supporting this contention was a recent Israeli study (Dreman & Aldor, 1994) which showed that custodial mothers, median time from divorce seven years, who were "deniers," had children who reported poorer levels of adjustment than "realistic" mothers who displayed good reality testing.

Since 30% of the mothers in the Dreman and Aldor study were deniers, even several years past the divorce event, such defense mechanisms should be seriously appraised when dealing with the divorced family. For example, if children's adjustment is facilitated in the short-term by parental denial, but ultimately hindered by ongoing denial processes, than parents might initially be permitted to engage in some denial, but ultimately should be encouraged to diminish such defensiveness in order to promote better reality testing and long-term adjustment (Dreman, 1991).

Custody type may interact with gender to influence children's adjustment. There is empirical evidence which shows that school age children adapt less well in the custody of an opposite-sex parent (Camara & Resnick, 1988; Furstenberg, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1989, 1990; Zill, 1988). Mothers have difficulties in disciplining, especially with boys (Hetherington, 1981; Hetherington et al., 1985). In this respect, recent research shows that boys without their father resident reported the lowest level of compromise with both mothers and fathers, a finding consistent with other findings which show that boys' accommodation to parental separation is more problematic (Honess, Charman, Zani, Cicognani, Xerri, Jackson, & Bosma, 1997).

Evidence of the important role that noncustodial fathers play was offered in a recent study which showed that non-coresiding fathers are perceived by their adolescent children as filling the functional roles of teacher, supporter, and challenger at a higher level than coresiding mothers (Munsch, Woodward, & Darling, 1995). More profound adverse effects for father absence are generally found for boys than girls, thus explaining in part why boys display poorer adjustment when in maternal custody (Mott, Kowaleskijones, & Menaghan, 1997).

Fathers with custody of daughters have difficulty in dealing with their needs such as that of providing an appropriate role model (Mendes, 1976; Warshack & Santrock, 1983). Girls in paternal custo-

dy and boys in maternal custody homes have been found to have the lowest levels of prosocial behavior and self-esteem, as well as displaying more aggression (Furstenberg, 1988; Camara & Resnick, 1988). Boys living with fathers, however, are more independent and social than girls in paternal custody, while girls living with mothers show better adjustment in these areas (Newcomber & Udry, 1987; Wallerstein et al., 1988).

Zaslow (1988, 1989) examined the hypothesis that boys are more negatively affected than girls by divorce when postdivorce family type, outcome measures, children's age and time since divorce were controlled. Twenty-seven research reports, comparing children of divorce with children of the same sex in intact families were examined. When postdivorce family type was examined, boys responded more negatively than girls, both immediately and over a period of years, if they were living with an unremarried mother (Fry & Scher, 1984; Guidubaldi, 1988), but fared better if the postdivorce family involved a custodial or stepfather (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985; Santrock & Warshack, 1979). This may be because for girls a stepfather may be troublesome, interrupting a close mother-daughter relation, while for boys he may represent a new father figure who provides male companionship as well as imposing more effective disciplinary methods (Kalter, 1977).

Researchers and practitioners must therefore consider the interaction of child's gender and postdivorce family structure in order to better understand children's postdivorce adjustment. There is evidence, for example, that boys still act out well past the initial two-to-three-year period of postdivorce disequilibrium if they continue to live with an unremarried mother (Guidubaldi, 1988; Hetherington et al., 1985). This finding questions research which has concluded that adjustment differences between boys and girls decrease as adolescence is approached because parental conflict, which affects boys more than girls, decreases, while for girls adjustment difficulties in such areas as heterosexuality and dependence increase disproportionately (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1978, 1979a; Kalter, 1984).

Parent-child conflict in the postdivorce family may explain why boys display continuing poor adjustment in solely mother-headed families, while girls adjust poorly in the family of remarriage. A six-year follow-up of children whose parents had divorced when they were of preschool age showed that mother-son relationships in divorced nonremarried families and stepdaughter-stepfather relationships in remarried families were particularly problematic (Hetherington

et al., 1982; Hetherington, 1987). Nonremarried mothers continued to exhibit many of the conflictual behaviors with sons that they had exhibited at two years postdivorce and were often involved in angry coercive cycles with them. Similarly, stepfathers in remarried families were more impatient with their stepdaughters and intensely hostile exchanges sometimes ensued between them.

Psychological adjustment of custodial and non-custodial parents. Observations suggest that the healthy psychological adjustment of the custodial parent can serve as a buffer for difficulties with the noncustodial parent and the postdivorce environment (Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 1989; Kline, Tschann, Johnston, & Wallerstein, 1988). Children in the custody of a psychologically depressed, anxious, or otherwise disturbed parent display serious deficits and deterioration in academic and social performance (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). With regard to noncustodial parents, continued involvement of a competent, well-adjusted noncustodial father, in an atmosphere of low interparental conflict, has been shown to have positive effects on children, especially boys (Hetherington et al., 1989).

Social Context

Emery (1988) has noted that besides individual and family-related stressors, long-term reactions to divorce are also influenced by pervasive stressors existing outside the nuclear family in the broader socio-cultural context. These include changing social support systems, changes in environmental stability and evolving cultural attitudes towards divorce. Social support has been shown to be important in coping with stress in divorce situations. Gamba and Dalla (1997), for example, found that both mothers' and children's reports of social support contributed to a diminishment of externalizing behavior problems.

Social Support

(a) *Parental support.* Social support serves as a source of practical and emotional backing for both parents and children experiencing family transitions (Hetherington et al., 1989). In the nuclear family parental support has been shown to be essential to children's divorce adjustment (Fogas, Wolchik, & Braver, 1987; Guidubaldi et al., 1986; Hetherington et al., 1978). This is reciprocal since children also provide support to their

parents contributing to their psychological well-being (Jacobs, 1982; Stewart, Schwebel, & Fine, 1986). There is evidence that children in divorced families reported greater family support and less peer support than children from intact families (Teja & Stolberg, 1993).

The extended family serves as a source of psychological and economic support in divorce (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Anspach, 1976). Between 25% and 33% of newly divorced custodial mothers reside with a relative, usually a mother (Hernandez, 1988). Grandparents help financially and share in child care, as well as with household responsibilities, providing their grown children and grandchildren with emotional support as well (Hetherington, 1989). Grandparents are likely to provide better support than siblings, because the latter often hold childhood grudges and may be preoccupied with their own families (Weiss, 1979). Research has shown that children display better adjustment in a home including the maternal grandmother than the mother alone (Kellam et al., 1977). Furthermore, sons in maternal custody have fewer behavior problems when they have an involved supportive grandfather who serves as a father substitute (Hetherington, 1988). In one of the rare studies conducted on familial support for custodial fathers, Grief (1987) found that custodial fathers continue their career without undue difficulty since many household tasks are taken over by female relatives.

(b) *Friendship based support systems.* As for nonfamilial support systems, married friends may be supportive initially, but after the first few months there is often a sharp decline, particularly for women (Stern, Peck, & Manocherian, 1988). While custodial mothers may be invited to child-centered events, they are often excluded from couple-focused social gatherings (Herz Brown 1988). The extrafamilial social network often shifts from old married friends to new, single, more casual acquaintances with similar interests and problems (Stern et al., 1988).

While social support has been shown to alleviate stress in parents (Chiroboga, Coho, Stein, & Roberts, 1979; Raschke, 1977; Spanish & Castro, 1979), the effect of support to parents on children's divorce adjustment has received little attention. Kurdek (1987) pointed out that research in this area has often had mothers assess both social support and their children's adjustment, thus biasing both measures. Kurdek (1988), however, obtained independent reports of adjustment from children and found that mothers' reports of high social support were in fact related to children's self-reports of adjustment.

(c) *Social support for children.* Little research has been conducted on support systems directly available to children postdivorce, although boys in families of divorce have been shown to have greater difficulties in self-disclosure and obtaining emotional support than girls, with these differences increasing with age (Hetherington, 1989). For children of divorce, the distinction between support from family versus nonfamily may be particularly important. Support from family may be important in facilitating one of the primary adaptive tasks of divorce, restructuring of family patterns and roles. Alternatively, support from nonfamily members may be useful because these people are less personally involved in the ongoing divorce process and may provide an outside perspective and relief from the stressful situation.

Wolchik, Ruehlman, Braver, and Sandler (1989) examined the perceptions of children of divorce with regard to the social support they received from familial vs. nonfamilial adults and children in their relation to children's adjustment. In accordance with a stress-buffering theory of social support, it was found that at high levels of stress, children who reported high social support from familial and nonfamilial adults reported fewer adjustment problems than those with low social support. At the lowest levels of stress, the stress-buffer theory did not hold true when nonfamilial adult social support systems were considered. In this case, the higher the level of nonfamilial social support perceived by these children, the poorer the adjustment reported by them. These researchers suggested that at higher levels of divorce stress, familial and nonfamilial adult support contributes to children's adjustment by allaying fears of abandonment, by compensating for the loss of a parent, and by helping children more accurately interpret the divorce events. Under low stress, however, outside help can sometimes be perceived as threatening and lead to negative adjustment if it represents a danger to autonomy and self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler, & Witcher-Alagna, 1982). Hence, Wolchik et al. (1989) suggest that in the low stress situation, the children perceived support from nonfamily members as threatening their sense of competence and as an indication that they were having difficulties, thus negatively affecting their self-ratings of adjustment. This was also true when parents rated their children's adjustment.

In the above study, support from other children (both familial and nonfamilial) was not significantly associated with children's adjustment as measured from either the parent's or child's perspective.

These findings are consistent with those of other researchers examining social support by peers and its effects on alleviating stress in children (Hirsch & Reischl, 1985).

There are several possible explanations for the lack of a relation between peer support and children's postdivorce adjustment in the Wolchik et al. study. Given that a central adaptive task in divorce involves redefining relationships with central adult caregivers (Felner, Farber, & Primavera, 1983), support from adults may be particularly important. Second, the average age of the children studied (11.5 years) in the above study may explain the lack of significant effects since young children may be unable to provide effective social support for each other, though peer support may effectively contribute to the adjustment of older adolescents (Burke & Weir, 1978; Greenberg, Siegel, & Leitch, 1983; Kurdek & Sinclair, 1988). Finally, the lack of significant effects for peer support systems may also be due to these researchers' focus on adjustment problems such as anger, anxiety, and depression, rather than on domains of positive functioning such as social competence or self-esteem where peer support may play a positive role (Wolchik et al., 1989; Wyman, Cowen, Hightower, & Pedro-Carroll, 1985).

Wolchik et al.'s study has important interventive implications. Support from peers does not seem to facilitate young children's adjustment after divorce, while support from adults does.

Preschool children receive the bulk of their social support at home (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1979a), while older children tend to use peers and the school setting as sources of social support (Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Responsive peers have been shown to positively influence the self-worth and competence of the older child and adolescent after divorce (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1988). Hence, the clinician should consider the child's cognitive and social developmental capacities, including their ability to utilize familial vs. extrafamilial support systems, when deciding on how to mobilize social support for the children of divorce. Attention should also be paid to the domains of positive functioning such as social competence and self-esteem, rather than focusing exclusively on adjustment problems such as anger, anxiety, and depression when peer support is being evaluated.

The school environment may serve as a source of social support. Children of divorce adjust better in school settings in which there is a

structured but supportive environment (Hetherington et al., 1978, 1979b), with structure being particularly important for young children's adjustment, but less important for older children. This "authoritative" support framework (Baumrind, 1971) is similar to the characteristics of parental discipline associated with younger children's positive adjustment, while encouraging autonomy and less control contributes to that of older children (Hetherington, 1981). These findings suggest that school and home support systems, working in tandem, might contribute positively to children's divorce adjustment.

Stability of the Postdivorce Environment

Children's perceptions of minimal control over divorce-related changes like income level (Burnett, 1983; Colletta, 1983; Levin, 1984), geographic location (Hodges, Wechsler, & Ballantine, 1979), family functioning and household routines (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, & McLaughlin, 1983; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979b; Kurdek & Blisk, 1983) serve as stressors. Poverty is a major stressor (Hernandez, 1988) with low income being accompanied by welfare, employment changes, poorer housing, schools, and child care as well as geographic instability (Hetherington et al., 1989).

The most significant limitation of research linking child adjustment to divorce is the failure to control for income and socioeconomic status (Demo & Acock, 1988). These variables and their correlates are confounded with divorce status, since those families with low or unstable incomes are most likely to divorce (Hernandez, 1988). When socioeconomic status is controlled, however, children in divorced families function as well as do those in two-parent families (Acock & Kielcolt, 1988; Peterson & Zill, 1986).

While custodial mothers usually experience diminished income, custodial and noncustodial fathers usually maintain or improve their standard of living after divorce (Hetherington & Stanley Hagan, 1986). Research might therefore investigate adjustment in paternal vs. maternal custody families when income is controlled, since reports of superior adjustment in paternal custody families (Ambert 1982, 1984) may be in part attributable to higher income and social standing in these families.

Geographic relocation may increase social isolation after divorce, and children suffer greatly since they need the continuity of familiar support systems to compensate for other losses (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Tessman, 1978). Changed household routines and a "chaotic life

style" is typical of the family of divorce. Nastasi (1988) reported that children in divorced families did less homework, watched more TV, had less organized home routines and engaged in less joint activities with their parents than children in intact families. Higher levels of TV viewing were related to poorer adjustment, as were less regular bedtimes.

Mothers beginning work in proximity to divorce may also cause adjustment difficulties since the child may feel abandoned by both parents (Hetherington et al., 1982). Change in employment status is important since women who worked prior to divorce do not find employment troublesome, while those starting after divorce found it more problematic for their children (Hetherington, 1981; Kinkard & Rinherz, 1984).

Cultural Context

In considering children's divorce adjustment, one must consider the "macrosystem," i.e., prevailing cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes which have been shown to affect adjustment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). If the family of divorce is perceived by society as a pathological entity with children at risk, this might result in a self-fulfilling prophecy producing adjustment difficulties. Teachers, for example, rated male children in discordant marriages as more problematic than mothers, who rated both boys and girls as equally problematic (Whitehead, 1979). Such attitudes might reflect social biases of teachers. Preventive educational work might be necessary to change prejudicial stereotypes and attitudes including those of educators, employers, mental health professionals and others who may affect the adjustment of single-parent families.

One must also consider intergenerational traditions and attitudes affecting adjustment. For example, young adults raised in families of divorce demonstrate less marital stability than those from intact families (Mueller & Cooper, 1986), supporting the thesis that family attitudes such as "intactness" are intergenerationally transmitted and affect family adjustment. Research investigating such "macro" attitudes would contribute to the understanding of adjustment in children of divorce.

CONCLUSIONS

Divorce adjustment is a dynamic process, but paradoxically individuals and families in crisis attempt to maintain the status quo and

illusion of well-being through utilization of prior roles and interaction patterns. Much of the coping behavior reported in the divorce literature is of such a “first order” or “more of the same” nature (Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). A child of divorce may replace an absent parent by recruiting a grandfather as a substitute father or alternatively may deny the parent’s absence and/or fantasize their return. “Second order” change (Watzlawick et al., 1974), in contrast, involves significant cognitive-emotional resolution with accompanying identity, behavioral, and role change. This process takes account of the new adverse realities of postdivorce life rather than defensively applying prior coping patterns and roles to the postdivorce family.

Divorce research might investigate first order coping strategies like role substitution and denial in relation to both children’s and adults’ postdivorce adjustment. Second order change might be measured by indices of profound identity change, role transformation, and a changing sense of competence. For example, Dreman, Orr, and Aldor (1990) found that recently separated women in Israel, median separation time four months, had an unduly high sense of competence despite low role efficacy. This contrasted with divorced women, median separation time 22 months, who had a lower sense of competence which more accurately reflected their low role efficacy at this time. It was suggested that the recently separated women used first order coping mechanisms expressed as denial of their negative divorce plight. In contrast, the longer separated women were more capable of cognitive-emotional integration of adverse divorce realities in their self-appraisals, with their sense of competence more accurately reflecting their diminished efficacy levels in the postdivorce period.

Dreman (1991) suggested that denial at the outset of the divorce process may be adaptive to both parents and children since it helps alleviate anxiety, thus contributing to day-to-day family functioning. It may result in poor long-term adjustment, however, since it prevents adaptive coping with new postdivorce realities. In support of this is a recent Israeli study which found that divorced mothers, median time from divorce seven years who were deniers, had children with higher levels of anxiety and lower self-esteem than divorced mothers who accurately perceived adverse environmental realities (Dreman & Aldor, 1994).

As for clinical implications, research which reliably establishes the relation between coping strategies and adjustment at different stages

of the divorce process should be done. A person's denial, for example, should not be diagnosed as pathological without considering how much time has elapsed since the occurrence of the traumatic events, since denial may be a normative and adaptive coping response at the outset of the divorce process. Denial may be considered pathological, however, if it persists when initial stress levels subside and realistic assessment of one's situation is necessary for adjustment. Relatedly, interventive efforts which encourage early emotional expression of the traumatic divorce events may contribute to maladjustment if they remove defenses protecting the individual against massive divorce-related stress at the outset of the crisis. When stress levels subside, however, parents and children may be more amenable to therapeutic efforts encouraging diminished denial, abreaction and integration of postdivorce realities.

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