

Controversies, Clarifications, and Consequences of Divorce's Legacy: Introduction to the Special Collection

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Recent publications describing long-term results of longitudinal investigations of divorced couples have stirred controversies because of substantial differences in findings. The current Special Collection was initiated to clarify some of the issues brought into controversy. Five primary themes are explored by the nine papers in this collection: How severe is the long-term effect of divorce on children? Why do various research findings on the long-term effect of divorce tend to disagree so substantially? Why is divorce considered a problem? What do children have to say about their experiences with divorce? And what, if anything, can be done to help the children of divorce?

In 1960 the divorce rate was about 15 per 1,000 married women age 15 to 44, virtually the same rate it was in 1940 as well as in 1950. However, by 1980 it had risen to 40 per 1,000, almost a threefold increase (Shiono & Quinn, 1994) in two decades. Although divorce rates have decreased a bit since then, they remain high, closer to 35 per 1,000. Recent estimates are that for adult baby boomers, 50% of first marriages will end in divorce (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). Further, 38% of children born to married parents will experience divorce before age 16 (Bumpass, 1984).

Although there was a smattering of research before divorce began to surge (e.g., Goode, 1956), the great volume of research on the process and aftermath of divorce rates began in the mid-1970s when the flood of divorces became unmistakable. With debate raging about legal reforms of divorce, researchers in the 1970s began to study divorce in great detail. Among the foundational investigations was work by Constance Ahrons (1980); Mavis Hetherington (1972, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976); Lenore Weitzman, (1985; Weitzman & Dixon, 1980); Robert Weiss (1975, 1976, 1979, 1984); Judith Wallerstein (Wallerstein & Lewis, 1998; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000); and her collaborator Joan Kelly (Kelly, 1982, 1988, 1989; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975, 1977, 1980).

During the next two decades, the 1980s and 1990s, a number of studies appeared documenting the outcomes of divorce, such as the incidence of mental health symptoms, disrupted parenting behaviors and quality parent-child relations, and postdivorce interparental conflict. However, it was not until recently that researchers could begin to definitively address the overarching, critical question: What are the long-term effects of divorce? It is fair to assume that divorce since 1970, when it became comparatively commonplace, unselective, and almost normative, had a fundamentally different character than it did when it was far more rare and stigmatized. Thus, examining the long-term effects of divorce on the cohort that divorced prior to 1970 ar-

guably would present different patterns than examining it thereafter. Prior to recently, assessing the long-term effects of divorce was empirically impossible, because there were few long-term divorces to study.

This situation changed dramatically in the last 2 years when landmark work on the long-term effects of divorce within families that had separated in and after the mid-1970s began to surface and gain media attention. Of great importance, the findings were based on long-term *longitudinal* studies of families who had been in the original cohorts of the foundational studies. Longitudinal investigations permit well-recognized advantages over cross-sectional ones in being able to provide a context and a history for individual trajectories, as well as greater opportunities to probe causal connections. Thus, it was with intense anticipation that researchers, therapists, policy makers, and other observers of family studies read the recent findings. The results were prominently covered in stories in mainstream media, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, *U.S. News and World Report*, National Public Radio (NPR), the *Today Show*, and *Good Morning America*, and occupied two *Oprah* segments.

The fascinating fact—and the impetus for this volume—was that these various releases appeared to be quite inconsistent in what they showed about the long-term “legacy” of divorce. Whereas some researchers’ findings allowed rather optimistic conclusions about children’s and families’ resiliency, others found darkly pessimistic evidence about the legacy of divorce. Some authorities suggested most children eventually bounce back pretty completely, whereas other reports had them largely scarred for life.

This inconsistency of results and perspective is far more than merely an academic debate. The conclusions that follow profoundly shape both policy and professional practice. Although colleagues in related fields bemoan the lack of interest in scientific findings by policy makers, this is not true of research on divorce. It is a field where courts and legislatures pay close attention to reports of research and attempt to intelligently weave empirical results into reforms and updated and sensitive policies. For example, Weitzman’s (1985) book was credited with a major role in reforming the child support system, whereas Johnston’s writings (1995) were influential in custody reform. Moreover, practice professionals, both those in the legal and behavioral

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fields, attend to research evidence and attempt to apply it in their practice. *Family Relations*, in fact, has just such a professional mission. We believe that both academics who study divorce and consumers of divorce-relevant evidence are rightly confused and disturbed by the apparent lack of consensus among the primary authorities in the field.

This Special Collection was conceived to shed light on this debate. We hoped to enlist all the principals of the controversy, as well as well-known writers who have made important recent contributions to divorce research with reference to the legacy or its implications, in an intellectual discussion about divorce's legacy. We prepared invitations to these leading scholars and were gratified to learn that everyone was enthusiastic about participating and contributing to this dialogue.

Judith Wallerstein was an eminent researcher who was central to the controversy, and who, in fact, coined the term "the legacy of divorce." Her publications since 1975 have been seminal and crucially important in how researchers, practitioners, and policy makers have understood the phenomena. It probably is safe to say that no one has been more influential. However, her writings have stirred substantial controversy. As Guest Editors of this Special Collection, aware of the controversy, we invited her to write both the opening article in order to set the stage, and the final article to respond to the other writers. Specifically, we wrote:

The opening piece will be the "stage setter" for the special issue: it will cast the issues of the long-term legacy of divorce in perspective. Then you would also write a "wrap up" piece, giving your summation, as a leader of the field, on the points raised by the other authors. . . . The working title of the Special Collection includes the words "controversies and clarifications," and we hope to foster dialog and discussion. . . . Writing the closing article gives you the chance (and the final word!) to respond to any issues raised by other writers that you feel require your comment.

Wallerstein initially agreed to participate and submitted the opening paper, which was accepted for publication. Unfortunately, she later withdrew from the project, and therefore her voice is missing from this dialogue.

Controversies, Clarifications, and Consequences

The articles included in this Special Collection ask five important questions about controversies regarding the long-term legacy of divorce. How severe is the long-term effect of divorce on children? Why do various research findings on the long-term effect of divorce tend to disagree so substantially? Why is divorce considered a problem? What do children have to say about their experiences with divorce? And what, if anything, can be done to help the children of divorce?

Foremost, controversy exists concerning the severity of the long-term effects of divorce on children and their parents. Included in this issue are three papers reporting long-term data on children of divorce, with each paper offering conclusions drawn from longitudinal data analysis. We begin with Hetherington's results from the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce and Remarriage, a project that has spanned three decades. In this paper, findings are presented on patterns of marital instability, divorcee adaptation to marital dissolution, and predictors of the intergenerational transmission of divorce. As an early contributor and present-day leader in the field of divorcing family process re-

search, Hetherington's findings set the stage for consideration of the many controversies associated with the long-term impact of divorce on families.

Amato then offers results on three controversial areas post-divorce: children's psychological adjustment, the likelihood of experiencing high levels of marital conflict and divorce, and lower quality parent-child relations. Using data from the Marital Instability Over the Life Course project, Amato provides quantitative evidence that each area of children's postdivorce adjustment is affected less strongly than has been reported elsewhere. His results suggest that the difference between children of divorce and children from nondivorced homes—although present—is not as great as frequently reported, which is a finding with far-reaching policy implications.

Next, Ahrons and Tanner pay special attention to children's relationships with their fathers over two decades after divorce. Although the role of fathers postdivorce has been studied somewhat, some of the most widely cited studies on the topic paint a bleak picture. For example, King (1994) reported that, in the years following divorce, a full 31% of noncustodial fathers had no contact with their children. Popenoe (1996) offered a biological explanation for father absence postdivorce, namely, that fathers are predisposed to be weakly attached to their children. However, evidence for maintaining father contact postdivorce is more limited. Relying on over 20 years worth of data, Ahrons and Tanner found that children of divorce, for the most part, had improved or stable relationships with their fathers after the dissolution. Low-quality father-child relations after divorce were characterized, in the short term, by father remarriage or low father involvement and in the long-term by high levels of interparental conflict following the divorce.

The second controversy concerns why various research projects appear to arrive at such disparate findings about the effects of divorce on children. Amato's paper and that of Kelly and Emery both devote considerable attention to this issue. They focus on a number of methodological features of Wallerstein's approach that make its findings so unique in the literature and limit the extent one can generalize from them. The first concerns the sample. They argue that it is small ($N = 60$) and disproportionately made up of upper-middle class families, as well as of troubled parents and dysfunctional families. Fabricius' paper adds that findings based on families who divorced before the major policy and procedural reforms (e.g., child support enforcement, joint custody, no-fault divorce, mediation) that plausibly could change the dynamics at work might be ungeneralizable in that respect as well. A second major methodological difficulty Amato noted (cf. Cherlin, 1999) was that the sample lacked any control or comparison group of nondivorcing families. Third, Amato and Kelly and Emery critique Wallerstein's method of data collection. Rather than using standardized quantitative instruments, she and her coinvestigators used clinical interpretive interviews with trained clinicians. If the clinician is searching or "pulling" for pathology, she or he is far more likely to "find" it than is another clinician working with the exact same client who assumes that the respondent or family is highly functional and healthy.

The third controversy concerns the nature of the divorce problem. Despite evidence for the positive benefits to children of escaping high-conflict marriages, divorce still is looked upon as a public policy problem to be solved. Two papers in this Special Collection review the evidence regarding the science and social construction of the divorce problem. First, Kelly and Em-

ery review the risk and protective factors associated with divorce and appraise the resilience of children's coping. They caution for special attention to be paid to the distinction between the pain of parental separation and the presence of psychopathology when discussing the implications of divorce. On the other hand, Coltrane and Adams apply a sociology of knowledge approach to how the divorce problem is uniquely framed by politicians and religious institutions. Reviewing literature from psychology, history, and sociology, they conclude that research emphasizing the negative outcomes of divorce tends to be championed by conservative moralists in lieu of less damning evidence.

Fourth, despite much armchair speculation about the unique perspective that children can provide to informing policy related to divorce, controversy exists regarding the value of "listening to children." Decisions that occur at the time of divorce regarding child custody, financial support, and noncustodial parent visitation have long-reaching implications for parents and children. Despite this acknowledgment, the voices of children typically go unheard. Two articles in the Special Collection address this issue. Warshak carefully considers the costs versus benefits of giving children more voice in decisions concerning them surrounding their parents' separation. He concludes that we must be particularly careful, and he recommends heeding their collective, rather than their individual, voices. Fabricius provides another perspective on listening by obtaining knowledge from college-aged children of divorce about their postseparation living arrangements and parent-child relations. For example, the students tended to favor joint custody arrangements, claiming that such provisions help them to adjust to the divorce while maintaining high-quality relations with both parents.

Finally, we consider what can be done to help children adjust to divorce. Currently, controversy exists regarding whether the negative impact of divorce on children can be mitigated. Although the perceived benefits of science-based preventive intervention programming have been advocated (Grych & Fincham, 1992), presently less is known about the mechanisms affected by divorcing parent intervention programming. Two papers in this Special Collection point to a number of innovations that are unquestionably effective. Haine, Sandler, Wolchik, Tein, and Dawson-McClure provide an overview of divorcing parent intervention programming, noting the value of theory-driven design and evaluation. Results are offered suggesting that prevention programming for custodial mothers have the potential to reduce, among other things, their psychological distress, a finding that has policy implications for how divorcing parent education programming is designed and delivered. Offering an international perspective on both the divorce problem and divorcing parent education, Walker reviews the history of family law in the United Kingdom and discerns both commonalities and differences in divorce practice between the two nations. Offering evaluation evidence on the social policy and value of informational meetings for divorcing parents in the U.K. to prevent divorce, she finds that immediately following participation, most parents reported enjoying the meeting; however, 2 years later the program had not deterred divorce.

Conclusion

The articles in this Special Collection highlight state of the art evidence about the long-term effect of divorce on children, controversies concerning this legacy, and implications for policy and practice. However, despite the conclusions that might be drawn from these papers, controversy will surely continue. In

the coming years, we can expect that more studies will be published concerning the long-term consequences of divorce on children, that experts will continue to weigh in with their professional opinions, and that family courts will strive to adapt and shape the services they provide for separating families. We hope these articles draw attention to the body of evidence that has amassed in the past three decades with the goal of informing research, policy, and practice for the decades that follow.

Each of the articles in this collection was reviewed by three expert-peer reviewers, whose reactions guided revisions. We would like to express our gratitude to the experts who offered their expertise and input to the revisions of these papers. Without their insightful comments, this Special Collection would not have been possible.

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