



Divorce and its Aftermath for Children: New Findings, New Challenges

Summary

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Talk Outline



- Divorce trends in Europe and the US
- The effects of parental divorce on children
- Long-term consequences through adulthood
- Parental divorce among adult children
- Future directions for divorce research

Divorce Trends

- [OECD Family Database](#) provides statistics on cross-national variation in divorce, including the crude divorce rate
- [Andersson and colleagues](#) (2017) track exposure to parental divorce among children by age 15. Cross-national estimates range from about 10% to 33%

Parental Divorce and Child Outcomes

- Divorce can be stressful for adults and children, but most bounce back and do just fine
- Children whose parents divorce tend to fare slightly worse on a range of outcomes:
 - Education
 - Psychological well-being
 - Physical health
 - Social adjustment

(Amato, 2010; Brown, 2017 for summaries)

The Prelude to Parental Divorce

- Children's well-being often declines before the divorce occurs
- Sometimes divorce is the best possible outcome in a worst case scenario
- Pre-divorce family environment matters

(Amato, 2010; Brown, 2017 for summaries)

The Pre-Divorce Family Environment

- When parents experience a lot of marital conflict, children are better off if their parents get divorced than stay married
- Surprise divorces marked by low conflict are detrimental to children
- These effects persist into young adulthood

(Amato & Booth, 1991)

The Aftermath of Divorce

- Family structure
 - The relationship ties of the child to the parent(s) in the household
- Family instability
 - Transitions from one family structure to another

Family Instability and Family Complexity

- Family instability, whether through divorce or repartnering, is more common in the US than Europe
(Amato & James, 2010; Cherlin, 2010; Thomson, 2014)
- Family complexity
 - The presence of half or step siblings in the household

Family Boundary Ambiguity

- Family boundary ambiguity refers to inconsistency in reporting who is in and who is out of the family
- Family structure is subjective
- The less institutionalized the family form, the more common is family boundary ambiguity

(Brown & Manning, 2009)

Long-term Consequences



- The consequences of divorce for children are intertwined with:
 - Family instability
 - Family complexity
 - Family boundary ambiguity
- Track family change and dynamics across childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood

Consequences of Family Instability

- Number of family transitions
- Duration of exposure
- Timing
- Stability is not always beneficial; transitions are not always detrimental

(Brown, 2010 for summary)

Consequences of Family Complexity

- Family complexity is associated with poorer:
 - Academic performance
 - Behavioral adjustment
 - Economic well-being
- How to integrate family structure, instability, and complexity?

(Brown, Manning, & Stykes, 2015; Ginther & Pollak, 2004; Halpern-Meekin & Tach, 2008)

Consequences of Family Boundary Ambiguity

- Family boundary ambiguity is linked to worse family functioning (Brown & Manning, 2009)
 - Less closeness to mothers
 - Less family connectedness
- Long-term implications of this ambiguity are unclear

Long-term Consequences of Parental Divorce

- Intergenerational transmission of divorce
- Early family formation
- Lower psychological well-being
- Lower educational and economic attainment

(e.g., Amato, 2010; Amato & Sobolewski, 2001; Bernardi, Boertien, & Geven, 2019; Harkonen, Bernardi, & Boertien, 2017)

Identifying the Mechanisms



- Selection
- Social learning
- Economic disadvantage
- Parent-child relationship dynamics

(e.g., Amato, 2010; Amato & Sobolweski, 2001; Brown, 2017, 2010)

The Gray Divorce Revolution

- The rate of gray divorce, which refers to divorce among adults aged 50 and older, has doubled since 1990 in the US (Brown & Lin, 2012)
- Other countries with rising gray divorce may include:
 - England
 - Switzerland
 - Sweden
 - Israel
 - Japan

Parent-Adult Child Dynamics after Divorce

- Children of divorced parents have weaker ties to their aging parents, especially fathers (Lin, 2008)
- How does the aging parent-adult child dynamic change when parental divorce occurs later in life?

Future Directions



- Gray divorce and its effects on adult children
- Most gray divorces occur in remarriages (Brown & Lin, 2012)
- Challenge: How do adult children respond to gray divorce?
 - Stepfamily vs nuclear family

Future Directions

- Most older adults do not repartner after gray divorce
(Brown, Lin, Hammersmith, & Wright, 2019)
- Challenge: Will adult children care for their aging, frail parents after gray divorce?
 - Intergenerational solidarity
 - Intergenerational transfers

Conclusion



- The divorce process
 - How does it unfold during childhood vs adulthood?
- Larger family context matters
 - Family instability
 - Family complexity
 - Family boundary ambiguity
- Track change from childhood through adulthood

Thank You

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