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 crossnational variation in divorce, including the crude divorce rate

 Andersson and colleagues (2017) track exposure to parental divorce among children by age 15. Crossnational 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?



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?

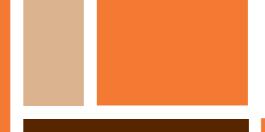
- Larger family context matters
 - Family instability
 - Family complexity
 - Family boundary ambiguity
- Track change from childhood through adulthood



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