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Impact of parental divorce on the lifestyle outlook of young adult children

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Impact of parental divorce on the lifestyle outlook of young adult children

Abstract

One of the more disturbing social phenomena in recent years has been the escalating divorce rate. It is estimated that one-half of all marriages initiated in the 1980s will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981). Out of these marriages and divorces, 60% of the couples who divorce each year have at least one child 18 or younger (Glick, 1979). Glick also predicted that by 1990, 33% of North American children will experience their parents' divorce before their 18th birthday.

Impact of Parental Divorce on the Lifestyle Outlook
of Young Adult Children

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One of the more disturbing social phenomena in recent years has been the escalating divorce rate. It is estimated that one-half of all marriages initiated in the 1980's will end in divorce (Cherlin, 1981). Out of these marriages and divorces, 60% of the couples who divorce each year have at least one child 18 or younger (Glick, 1979). Glick also predicted that by 1990, 33% of North American children will experience their parents' divorce before their 18th birthday.

Although much of the literature (Hammond, 1979; Hetherington, 1979; Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976; Rubin & Price, 1979) discusses the influence of parental divorce on young children, less is known about the impact of this life event on the developmental patterns of late adolescents and young adults. This neglect is surprising considering the significance of this period in shaping the individual's early adult roles, values, and functions. College students face important demands such as establishing adequate psychological separation from parents; forming intimate, nonfamilial relationships; adjusting to the academic and social demands of college life; and making preliminary decisions regarding work, marriage, and family (Lopez, 1987).

The transition to young adulthood is a difficult period and one in which the degree of mature resolution of family relationships plays a powerful determining role (Meyer, 1980).

relationships plays a powerful determining role (Meyer, 1980). The unattached young adult's preliminary challenge is to come to terms with the family of origin. Optimum resolution of the transition from adolescence to adulthood entails separating from the family, achieving emotional maturity, and developing an independent self-identity (Nichols, 1984).

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature concerning the changes in lifestyle outlook for young adult children of parental divorce. These changes are in four areas: (a) perceptions of self; (b) changes in parent-child relationships; (c) transition to adulthood; and (d) formation of intimate relationships.

Perceptions of Self

The age group involved in these studies is primarily college students 17-23 years of age who are referred to as late adolescents and young adults. These persons are studied because they are an available and definable segment of the population.

Adult children of divorce reported increased emotional difficulties, conflicting loyalties to parents, anger, and worries about their future (Bales, 1984). More specifically Kalter, Reimer, Brickman, and Cheng (1985) stated that emotional difficulties shared by daughters of divorce may have potential negative effects that do not come sharply

into focus until late adolescence or young adulthood. Problems in feminine self-esteem and heterosexual adjustment may not emerge until these issues become centrally important developmentally.

Emotional Difficulties

Young women whose parents divorce had a less positive view of femininity than women from a nondisrupted home. The findings suggested that parental divorce may interfere with a daughter accepting and valuing her femininity. College student daughters of divorce had a more negative image of their own gender than women reared with both biological parents at home. College age females from divorced homes demonstrated greater insecurity and more negative self-evaluations than their counterparts from intact families (Farber, Primavera, & Felner, 1981). While female subjects had more positive views of themselves as individuals, they were reported to be more anxious and depressed than their male counterparts (Young & Parish, 1977).

Hepworth, Ryder & Dreyer, (1984) stated divorce is better characterized as a family disruption than as a parental loss; resulting perhaps in a loss of faith in the image of an ideal family. This loss of a parent affects intimate relationships for both males and females. Daughters of divorce sought more attention from males (Hepworth et al., 1984) and had more

difficulties with sexual identity, and also married earlier than daughters of intact families (Farber, Primavera, & Felner, 1983). Sex differences were reported, both in the degree to which parental divorce affects the lives of these young men and women at college, and in these students' use of the mental health services as a coping aid. Female adolescents studied sought mental health counseling more frequently than male subjects in an attempt to adapt to parental divorce.

Behavioral problems most frequently displayed by young adults experiencing family divorce included drug and alcohol usage, sleeping and eating disturbances, and an inability to concentrate on studies. Compared to young adults from intact families, young adults from divorced families were also seen as having greater difficulties in interpersonal relationships (Farber et al., 1983).

Conflicting Loyalties

Some young adult children of divorce reported conflicting loyalties to parents. Although custody is not usually a factor, the absence of the custody issue does not mean there are no loyalty dilemmas (Schwartz, 1985). Stress appeared linked to anticipation of having to take sides with their parents. Much time and effort was expended trying to balance time and attention to each parent. Young adult women took sides and experienced higher incidence of emotional stress

(Cooney, Hagestad, & Smyan, 1984). Since these young women preferred to be free and accepting of both parents, taking sides in the situation created stress. In addition, distressing parental behavior denigration of one (parent) by the other created divided loyalties (Rosen, 1979).

Anger

Anger is a common experience in the reactions of these young adults of divorce with 67% reporting at least initial anger at the news of the divorce (Cooney, Smyer, Hagestad, & Klock, 1986). Anger was more frequently reported by women than men, 76% versus 50%. Women were more likely than men to discriminate between their parents as targets of their anger. Forty-three percent of women identified their fathers as the lone target of their anger, while only 14% cited their mothers as targets. In contrast, 11% of men identified mother and 11% identified father as the lone target of their anger. Twenty-eight percent of the men and 19% of the women reported anger toward both parents.

Jordan (1984) suggested the tendency for young women to empathize more than young men and to be close to their mothers may further complicate the young women's postdivorce adjustment. Lopez (1987) observes that students of divorced families generally evaluated their parents, especially their fathers, less favorably. Whether the observation indicates

the presence of lingering, unresolved anger and resentment, or simply reflects a less idealized and more realistic approach of parents remains an open question.

The mother-daughter bond seems to weather the stress of divorce better than any other parent-child relationship. Gilligan (1982) suggested more emotional investment is made in the divorce by daughters than sons, and young women concern themselves more than young men do with the maintenance of connections in personal relationships.

Worries About Future

Worries about their financial future were realistic as divorced families may experience a lower standard of living (Hetherington, Cox & Cox, 1979). A family's assets must be divided differently and parents do not always consider the effects of their continued postdivorce conflicts on their young adult children (Schwartz, 1985). Students in college, caught in the conflicts of divorced parents' continuing strife, may have uncertainty as to whether their support will continue and, if so, from whom. However, a significant portion of the population of young adults of divorced parents may not be accounted for in these studies because changes in the familys' financial situation may have prevented these young adults from attending college.

In Wallerstein's (1987) 10-year study regarding financial support during college, she states that despite the high professional status of many of the fathers, economic support and encouragement for these young people during their college years was often absent. Of the young adult children in 2-year and 4-year college programs, only half received financial help that was appropriate to their fathers' economic means. Among the remainder, many were entirely unsupported by fathers who were well able to provide for them. All but one of the mothers were employed at low-paying jobs. Feelings of disappointment, bewilderment, and low-keyed resentment toward fathers were widespread among these college-aged youngsters.

Factors with Mediating Effects

While parental divorce generally seemed to be associated with increased stress and emotional and behavioral difficulties, a number of factors were felt to be potentially important mediators of these efforts (Bales, 1984; Schwartz, 1985). The degree of family conflict prior to and following the divorce, their religious background, year in college, place in sibling constellation, and the amount of time they had been out of the home prior to the divorce, all had a potentially important impact on young adults' efforts to adapt to this transition.

Another factor mediating the emotional difficulties was support networks. Young adult children found support networks among their friends, dating partners, and siblings (Schwartz, 1985). Maternal and paternal relatives were generally a positive visible support at the time of divorce if they lived close enough, but for many young adult children grandparents and other relatives often lived at a distance.

Changes in Parent-Child Relationships

The positive changes in parent-child relations following divorce, reported by Cooney et al. (1984), were increased communication, greater understanding, mutual respect, and relaxation of the parent-child roles which often results in greater friendship between generations. Over one-half of the young adults noted improved relations with their mothers and one-third noted similar changes in relationships with fathers.

If relations deteriorated, fathers were usually the parent involved (Cooney et al., 1984). The main negative changes tended to be between daughter and fathers. Disrupted relationships with daughters were twice as frequent with fathers as with mothers. When young men reported a decline in relationships, it was with both mothers and fathers.

Fathers appear to lose out considerably in their relations with daughters; in relations with both daughters and sons,

they were less likely than mothers to experience positive outcomes following divorce. Mother-daughter bonds tended to be more resilient than other parent-child bonds following divorce, and, in many cases, seem even to intensify.

The psychological significance of the father continues to be necessary for both adolescent and young adult women (Wallerstein, 1987). In findings derived from the study of sex role development (Lamb, 1981; Lozoff, 1974; Lynn, 1974), fathers optimally can foster healthy psychological development in their daughters in two ways. First, a father can be a girl's ally in her early struggle to separate psychologically from her mother and in her continued efforts to establish a firm sense of her feminine individuality. Second, a father can serve as a source of masculine-based self-esteem for his daughter by accepting and valuing her femininity.

Several researchers have investigated the relationship of parental divorce and college students' self-evaluation and evaluative ratings of their parents. No significant differences were found in self-evaluation from intact and nonintact households. However, students from divorced family backgrounds rated both themselves and their parents less favorably (Boyd, Nunn, & Parish, 1983), and endorsed more negative attitudes regarding parental child rearing roles (Nunn & Parish, 1982).

College students who experienced divorce, rated their parents, especially their fathers, more negatively (Fine, Moreland, & Schwebel, 1983; Rozendal, 1983), and perceived their postdivorce family environments to be less cohesive and more stressful (Kennedy, 1985). After parental divorce, the absence of the two-parent authority structure permitted and possibly discouraged the student to assume greater personal and household responsibility--fostering earlier maturity (Weiss, 1979).

White, Brinkerhoff, and Booth (1985) reported that divorce does not reduce the student's attachment to the custodial parent, but does reduce the attachment to the noncustodial parent, thereby minimizing the young adult's total support network. This implies that parental divorce may accelerate the separation-individualization tasks of young adulthood. Students from divorced families indicated significantly greater functional and emotional independence from their fathers and greater attitudinal independence from both parents. Yet, at the same time, they reported significantly lower conflictual independence from their fathers than did their peers from intact homes (Lopez, 1987). This finding indicated the possible presence of greater conflict, unresolved anger, and resentment in the student's relationship with the divorced father who is typically the noncustodial parent.

In the students' efforts to deal with parental divorce, using family members as social supports was helpful (Farber et al., 1981). While students who turned more frequently to family members for help and support in dealing with nondivorce related events had more negative personal self-concepts, those students whose families were perceived to be more helpful social supports, were less depressed. Thus, the "quality" of the social support family members offer may be more important than the "quantity" of support sought by adolescents and young adults in determining their positive adaptation to this life transition.

When attempting to deal with the concept of divorce itself, the utilization of family members as social supports helped gain better feelings about oneself as a family member. Among family members turned to for help, mothers and older siblings were identified as the primary sources of support (Farber et al., 1983). Mothers and older siblings were turned to significantly more often than fathers, younger siblings, and other relatives.

In another emotional consequence of divorce, 77% of the young adults reported worries about one or both of their parents (Cooney et al., 1984). When only one parent was the focus of concern, it was the mother. The added apprehension

about parents' well-being raises the issue of stress overload on these students.

Some of the young adults even worried about roles their parents would expect them to assume in the future. These young adults not only felt troubled about their parents' current state, but also about how their parents were going to deal with being alone as they grew older. In many cases concerns seemed to be linked with new demands for support from parents following the divorce.

Transition to Adulthood

College Adjustment

Farber et al. (1983) reported their findings indicate that parental divorce may be a highly stressful life transition for young adults of college age. It may produce adjustment problems in interpersonal relationships, sexual identity, substance abuse, and academic performance. Less is known about the impact of the divorce on the developmental patterns of late adolescents and young adults than for younger children (Lopez, 1987). However it is known that this transition is a significant period in shaping the individual's early adult roles, values, and functions. College students face important demands such as establishing adequate psychological separation from parents; forming intimate nonfamilial relationships; adjusting to the academic and social demands of college life;

and making preliminary decisions about work, marriage, and family.

Personal Adjustment

In Wallerstein's (1987) fourth report from a 10-year longitudinal study of 131 children from 60 divorcing families, she reported separation from the divorced family and the transition into young adulthood is especially painful for some of these young people. These troubled young people were burdened by intense worries about failure in their present and future relationships, by their sense of having been insufficiently nurtured and encouraged during their years of growing up, and by an overall sense of their own powerlessness. They had realistic concerns about their college years. The young men were reminded of their earlier separation from father and may experience a renewed need for their father's presence and encouragement as they negotiate away from the custodial mother.

As with younger children (Farber et al., 1981), experiencing divorce this life transition for young adults appeared to lead to heightened vulnerability and risk for emotional difficulties, increased difficulties around interpersonal relationships, sexual identity, and academic performance. During life transitions, individuals may be

particularly vulnerable to emotional distress and to the development of enduring maladaptations.

College students may react differently to the experience of parental divorce than do younger individuals, both because of their developmental level and because of living in the college environment. Developmentally, the college student is likely to have a relatively mature ego, with the capacity to use higher order defense mechanisms, such as suppression, sublimation and altruism in dealing with feelings related to divorce (Schwartz, 1985). At the same time, however, the developmental tasks of college students such as consolidation of an independent identity and development of intimacy, may be particularly vulnerable to disruption by stresses of parental divorce (Hillard, 1984). It is generally assumed that effective transition from late adolescence to young adulthood is characterized by consolidation of a positive self-concept, the achievement of adequate psychological separation from parents, and the establishment of intimate nonfamilial relationships (Blos, 1979; Dashef, 1984; Erikson, 1968).

Formation of Intimate Relationships

Hepworth et al. (1984) states that it has long been a clinical commonplace that disruptions of family may be paid for in symptomatic behavior of children. From a family point

of view, the results presented here might be viewed in this way: the ultimate marital disruption--loss of a spouse-- leads to compensating behavior by adolescent and young adult children in the form of avoiding intimate relationships, seeking a committed relationship sooner than one would otherwise, or splitting the difference with a series of casual relationships.

Young adults with loss by divorce seem to have accelerated courtship patterns and more interest in relationships. By moving in and out of a series of relationships some divorce-loss persons seek to demonstrate, that losses do not hurt and that relationships have a diminished value. Thus, these persons can partially satisfy a wish to recover a loss, and also support a negative family view of the lost relationship (Hepworth et al., 1984).

Parental divorce seems to increase courtship activity for young adults especially if there is continued postdivorce conflict between the ex-spouse or between parents and children. Students from divorced families demonstrated accelerated courtship patterns relative to patterns from intact families. Kalter et al. (1985) found the population of young adult college women whose parents had divorced began dating earlier, were more active sexually, were less satisfied in their dating

relationships, and had a less positive image of femininity than women from non-disrupted families.

Booth, Brinkerhoff, and White (1984) reported that students who were children of divorce, as compared with those from intact families, were more likely to engage in premarital sexual intercourse and to be living with a sexual partner. These researchers hypothesized that these students may be modeling their parents' behavior.

Females were found more likely to cohabit if there was a postdivorce conflict or deterioration in parent-child relationships. Seeking affection under stress, modeling one's behavior on a parent (especially if that parent remains single), and premarital sexual relations are not, however, particularly abnormal phenomena in today's society (Schwartz, 1985). Also directors in college mental health facilities (Farber et al., 1983) indicated that counselees with divorced parents were no more likely to engage in an increased number of casual sexual relationships than their counterparts from intact families.

However low self-esteem could be evidenced in inappropriate choices of marital partners or picking partners who derogate. These problems may be handled by either retreating from intimate heterosexual relationships or by becoming promiscuous in an attempt to feel, however fleetingly,

femininely desirable and worthwhile (Kalter et al., 1985). Professional caregivers also perceived these young adults of divorced parents as having greater difficulties in interpersonal relationships including problems with peers, loyalty conflicts with their parents, and more difficulty with sexual identity (Farber et al., 1983).

According to Schwartz (1985), many young adults from divorced parents have a less romantic, more serious view of marriage than their peers from intact families. Kalter's et al. (1985) findings say, however, that even a group of well-functioning young women of divorced parents may be at greater risk than others for experiencing difficulty in long-term relationships. The more negative view of both men and women held by daughters of divorce, and their uneasiness about marriage does not bode well for future mature relationships.

Conclusion

This study consisted of a review of literature concerning the changes in lifestyle outlook for young adult children whose parent divorced. These changes were in perceptions of self, in parent-child relationship, in transition to adulthood, and in formation of intimate relationships. The following conclusions may be drawn. This young adult population has lower individual self-esteem and more negative evaluations of themselves and their parents than their peers from intact

homes. Following a divorce, the mother-daughter bonds are usually strengthened. Father-daughter bonds, although needed, may be disrupted and de-emphasized. Adjustment to college by these young adults may be affected by unresolved conflicts and emotions from the divorce period. These young adults may have a more negative, less sanguine view of marriage than their counterparts from intact families.

Further research concerning the effects of divorce on young adult children is warranted. Present research is limited qualitatively and quantitatively.

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