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Introduction

Variations in and Fluidity of Divorce Experiences and Outcomes

There is perhaps no more appropriate adjective to describe the divorce process than stressful. Few individuals who have been touched by divorce would express any doubt that the divorce process is stressful for family members. The degree and duration of the stress may vary within and across individuals and families, but even for those who benefit from divorce, the experience is characterized by multiple stressors. Many argue that it is the single most stressful life experience, even more stressful than other major stressors such as job change, unemployment, chronic illness, or widowhood (Braver, Shapiro, & Goodman, 2006; Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974).

Not only is the divorce process a stressful one, but it is a very common experience. Divorce is experienced by a substantial number of people in the United States and, in fact, in Western societies in general. Because it is not possible to know precisely which marriages will and which will not end in divorce, demographers have developed sophisticated approaches to estimating divorce rates. Most estimates by demographers suggest that approximately half of married individuals will eventually divorce their spouse (see Amato & Irving, 2006; Bramlett & Mosher, 2001). This well-known 50% rate is computed from the number of individuals who marry and divorce in a given year; however, because these figures are based on different groups of people, it has been argued that these estimates are inaccurate.

Kreider (cited in Hurley, 2005), a demographer for the U.S. Census, has suggested that estimates calculated in this manner are inflated and

that the preferred method to determine the divorce rate is to calculate the percentage of people who have ever been married who later divorce. Based on this method, Kreider argues that the divorce rate has never exceeded 41% and has declined slightly in recent years (also see Amato & Irving, 2006). Further, Martin (cited in Hurley, 2005) determined that this drop is due to a decline in divorce among college graduates. The divorce rate in the first 10 years of marriage for college graduates married between 1990 and 1994 was 40% lower (16%) than the comparable rate for those married between 1975 and 1979 (27%). The divorce rate for non-college graduates has remained quite stable over the same time period.

With roughly 40% of first marriages ending in divorce, societal concern has focused primarily on the consequences for children. Kreider (2007), based on U.S. Census data, estimated that 1.1 million children (15 per 1,000 children) experienced the divorce of their parents in 2004. Obviously, a much larger number of children will experience the divorce of their parents at some time before they turn 18 years of age. Partly as a result of the relatively high divorce rate, but not solely because of it (a child may be born to a single parent, a child's biological parent may die), many children spend a considerable portion of their childhood in family arrangements other than living with their two biological parents. For example, 26% (19 million) lived with one parent, and 7.2% (5.3 million) lived with a biological parent and a stepparent in 2004 (Kreider, 2007). As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 4, there are important demographic variations in the frequency of divorce and living in different family types.

Our focus on divorce does not mean that it is the only way that couples dissolve their relationship. Divorce is only one way—a legal way—to terminate one's relationship; the spouses also may separate from one another indefinitely and retain their legal status as a married couple. Thus, divorced couples should be regarded as a subset of the larger population of couples whose relationships have dissolved. Further, the divorced subset is not randomly drawn from the population of dissolved relationships, as those who divorce, as opposed to those who stay married despite the dissolution of their relationship, would seem to be more likely to come from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds, enabling them to afford the legal costs associated with obtaining a divorce. This difference needs to be kept in mind as research pertaining to divorce is reviewed in subsequent chapters.

Another important aspect of the demography of divorce is based on what may seem like an obvious point: The discussion of divorce rates pertains only to those who have the legal option to marry—heterosexual couples. Couples that are not married, such as cohabiting heterosexual and gay and lesbian couples, obviously cannot divorce. However, their relationships can and sometimes do dissolve, although it is statistically harder to identify both the beginning and the end of nonmarital relationships. Attempts have been made to estimate dissolution rates for nonmarital relationships, particularly in countries that have legalized gay and lesbian relationships in the form of registered partnerships.

Although some countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Canada, Spain, and Belgium) have granted gay and lesbian partners the right to marry, others (e.g., Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and some U.S. states) have permitted only registered partnerships, which is a legal status similar, but not identical, to marriage. In addition to the fact that all Scandinavian countries have legalized gay and lesbian partnerships (Andersson, Noack, Seierstad, & Weedon-Fekjaer, 2006), these countries provide a methodological advantage for researchers by maintaining very detailed and complete records on marriages and divorces (the legal dissolution of a registered partnership is also known as a divorce). Thus, it is somewhat easier for demographers to generate accurate population estimates of various family-related phenomena in these countries than in the United States. Andersson et al. estimated that in Norway and Sweden, respectively, 13% and 20% of gay male partnerships and 21% and 30% of lesbian partnerships are likely to end in divorce within 6 years (Norway) or 5 years (Sweden) of partnership registration. These rates are higher than the 13% of heterosexual marriages that end in divorce within 5 years in Sweden, but not higher than divorce rates in the United States (Andersson, 2002).

In the United States, dissolution rates for gay and lesbian relationships have been computed from the samples employed in several studies, but not from the population as a whole. Kurdek (1992) found a dissolution rate of 19% among lesbian and gay cohabiting couples over a 4-year period, while Gartrell et al. (2000) found that 31% of cohabiting lesbian couples with children had separated by the time their children reached the age of 5. These rates provide useful descriptive information, but are not very helpful from a comparative perspective because it is problematic to compare dissolution rates from nonrandom samples to the more representative data for heterosexual couples.

As is appropriate for a process that occurs as frequently as divorce, research has extensively examined the effects that divorce has on family members, particularly in terms of how family members who have experienced divorce compare with those who have not experienced divorce. Such comparisons have provided a wealth of useful information, and much of this knowledge base will be reviewed in subsequent chapters in this book. However, a central theme in this book is that these comparisons of group averages (means) often mask variations in how individuals experience the process of divorce. Students of statistics know that measures of central tendency provide an overall picture of the average score of a particular group, but they do not provide any information relative to variations in scores within the group. Thus, our focus in this book is primarily on these variations, and mean differences between groups are relegated to the contextual background.

PURPOSE AND GOALS OF THIS BOOK

Given the tremendous diversity and variation in processes, experiences, and outcomes that will be briefly introduced later in this chapter and described in more detail in subsequent chapters, our primary purpose in writing this book is to present a view of divorce that focuses on variations in experiences and changes over time. To provide a foundation for these emphases, in this chapter, we will describe two themes of the divorce process that have not received adequate attention in previous research and theory and that will be emphasized throughout this book: 1) variations in experiences and outcomes and 2) fluidity and change.

Variations in experiences and outcomes related to divorce. The first theme is related to the point made earlier that previous research has tended to emphasize differences in group means, such as the average difference between children of divorce and children from first-marriage families, on such adjustment indicators as school performance, behavior problems, and emotional adjustment. Mean group differences are important to examine, and they have provided a vast amount of valuable information. What is missing from this emphasis, however, is attention to the variability within each group in how children and parents react to divorce. Thus, our first theme is the considerable variability that characterizes the experiences and outcomes of those who have experienced divorce.

By experiences, we are referring to how individuals interpret the divorce-related events in their lives, how they make sense of these events, and how they place them in the context of their previous life history. Harvey and Fine (2004) asked college students whose parents divorced to tell a story of their divorce-related experiences. The narrative stories that emerged showed that there was substantial variability in the college students' accounts and that these stories fell roughly into four overlapping and not mutually exclusive categories: stories culminating in growth, stories of turmoil and despair, stories of father loss, and stories highlighting the complexity and nuanced nature of divorce experiences, such as chaos coexisting with resilience. Even within each of these categories, there was still some variability in the accounts of what transpired related to the students' parents' divorce.

Such variation in divorce-related experiences raises questions about at least two principal tenets of stage theories of divorce adjustment (see Chapter 6; Rollie & Duck, 2006)—that there is a high degree of uniformity in how individuals experience divorce and that well-adjusted individuals progress in a linear sequence through a series of defined and discontinuous stages. The poignant stories in the Harvey and Fine (2004) study show very clearly that young adults whose parents divorced share a number of experiences with each other, but that they also have many unique experiences as well. The accounts also show that progress, even in the best of situations, is not necessarily linear and that periods of growth and resilience are intertwined with, and sometimes concurrent with, periods of turmoil and difficulty.

In addition to considerable variability across individuals in divorce-related experiences, there is also variability with respect to divorce-related outcomes. By outcomes, we mean the tangible markers of how well individuals adjust to the stressors they have experienced and with which they are currently coping. There are several different dimensions of adjustment reflected in these outcomes, such as socioemotional, psychological, academic, behavioral, and socioeconomic. Although people who are well adjusted in one domain are often functioning well in other domains, individuals may function well in one or a few spheres, but not in others. For example, it is not uncommon for children to perform well in school (i.e., academic outcomes), but to experience low levels of self-esteem and high levels of depression and anxiety (i.e., psychological outcomes). For this reason, it is important to distinguish among these different outcome domains.

As an example of how researchers can (and sometimes have) examined variability in outcomes in different family types, Halpern-Meekin and Tach (2008) compared outcomes for adolescents in four different types of two-parent families—those born into a first-marriage two-parent family (typically referred to as intact families); those living with their biological parents who are in a remarriage and who are living with at least one stepsibling (shared children in blended families); those living with only one biological parent, a stepparent, and shared children to the remarried couple (stepchildren in blended families); and those living with one biological parent, a stepparent, and no half-siblings (stepchildren in stepfamilies).

For our purposes here, the first two groups are of interest (other findings from this study are reviewed in Chapter 8). Although adolescents in both of these groups were living with their biological parents, those who were shared children in blended families did not themselves experience parental divorce, but at least one of their parents was previously married and brought a child into the household from this previous relationship. Those in the blended family group fared worse in academic performance, delinquency, depression, and school detachment. Although neither group experienced parental divorce, this novel comparative study is especially relevant to our focus on within-group variability. In most research examining family structure, these two family types are aggregated together into two-parent or intact families, but Halpern-Meekin and Tach's (2008) investigation shows that there are important differences within the larger population of adolescents who are living with both of their biological parents. In this study, it is unclear why there were these outcome differences, but it seems quite likely that stresses stemming from the previous divorces of the parents in blended families (i.e., before the birth of the shared children), the presence of half-siblings, conflictual relations with the previous spouse(s), or merely the greater complexity inherent in blended families may have contributed to these differences.

A plethora of scholarly attention has been devoted to the outcomes of adults and especially children during and following divorce. We review these bodies of scholarly work later in the book, with separate chapters focusing on adult outcomes (Chapter 7) and children's outcomes (Chapter 8). Unlike other reviews, ours places relatively less emphasis on average (or mean) differences among groups, but highlights variability and change in how individuals adjust to the divorce experience. To the extent that the research evidence permits, we discuss how divorce-related outcomes are associated with processes occurring before, during, and after the divorce;

how adjustment depends on the diverse contexts in which the individuals find themselves; and the specific domains of adjustment that have been examined in divorce outcomes research.

Fluidity of family composition. There has been a strong tendency in previous work to treat divorce and other family structure changes in a static manner (i.e., either they happen or they do not; an individual either is in a single-parent family or is not), whereas the more complex reality (and more difficult problem to research) is that children and parents tend to experience a variety of changes in family composition over time. Thus, the second theme emphasizes the fluidity and change that are inherent in family members' experience of divorce and related compositional changes.

One of the most striking aspects of children's and parents' family circumstances is their *fluidity*. Fluidity refers to the frequency and rate of changes in family-related experiences and outcomes. In this chapter, we focus on the fluidity of family composition (Burton & Jayakody, 2001); fluidity in other divorce-related outcomes and experiences is addressed in subsequent chapters. Perhaps because of researchers' tendency to study family composition at only a single point in time, there has been a tendency to think that family composition is quite stable. And indeed, it is stable in some ways for the decreasing proportion of family members who grow up in a nondisrupted family and who experience no transitions in their marital or parenting statuses as adults. But for many or even most other children and adults, it is common to experience frequent changes in family composition. Wu and Martinson (1993) identified 187 unique sequences of living arrangement transitions among women under age 50 and found considerable variability among these women in the number of transitions experienced and the rapidity with which they occurred.

Research confirms that transitions in living arrangements are common for children as well. Wojtkiewicz (1992), based on analyses of the National Survey of Families and Households data set, showed that children in nonintact families at age 15 had typically lived in a combination of two-parent and single-parent family structures, suggesting that any one-time snapshot view of family structure can lead to misleading inferences regarding family environment. In addition, Wojtkiewicz found that children born to single mothers differed considerably in their experience of family structure from those who lived with both parents at birth. Children in the first group spent very little time living in two-parent families (i.e., with their biological mother and

a stepfather), whereas those in the second group tended to spend approximately 50% of their childhoods in two-parent arrangements (i.e., in either a first-marriage or a remarried family).

In addition, because 30% of single parents cohabit with a partner or live in their parents' household, Bumpass and Raley (1995) argued that single-parent families need to be defined based on who is living in the home rather than on parents' marital status. Perhaps an unmarried parent who cohabits with a partner who plays a parental role should not be considered a single parent. Further, a sizable minority of children not only experience multiple transitions (see Chapter 9), but also experience the possibility of being separated from both biological parents (Teachman, 2002).

Not surprisingly, research has suggested that there are clear differences in outcomes for family members who live in different family compositions. For example, Oldehinkel, Ormel, Veenstra, DeWinter, and Verhulst (2008), in a prospective sample of Dutch adolescents, found that parental divorce was associated with higher levels of parent-reported depression for the sample as a whole. However, there were gender differences in how depression symptoms changed as the adolescents aged from 10 to 15 years. For boys, depressive symptoms decreased in magnitude for both the divorced and the nondivorced groups between the ages of 10 and 15. For girls, those who experienced parental divorce reported an increase in depressive symptoms over time, while those who did not experience divorce showed no significant change in depression. Thus, this study yielded gender differences in the depressogenic effects of divorce, as girls became increasingly vulnerable over time, whereas boys did not.

We will review this literature in more detail in Chapter 8, but the point here is that the fluidity of family composition is clearly related to significant variation in outcomes for family members. Such variation makes it misleading to draw simple generalizations regarding the effects that particular types of family composition (especially if assessed at only one point in time) have on family members. As discussed more below, we need new emphases, and ideally new models, to extend our understanding of how transitions in family composition affect the ebb and flow of long-term adjustment.

One particularly important type of transition occurs when children physically move from one residence to another. A recent meta-analysis (Bauserman, 2002) documented that joint physical or legal custody, compared with sole custody, has positive effects on children's family relationships, self-esteem, and emotional and behavioral adjustment. Even though joint custody appears to facilitate the ongoing involvement of both

parents in children's lives, this benefit comes with at least a modest cost—the children may have to move back and forth between their parents' homes. This illustrates an important point relative to children of divorce: Even when they are placed in healthy environments, these contexts almost always involve change and stress for the children.

APPROACH

The approach that we take in this book is broad brushed, with particular attention devoted to variability in responses to divorce and the fluid nature of divorce. The book builds on recent theoretical models that guide the research literature on divorce and presents a new dynamic model of the divorce process. Our intent is for this book to extend our scholarly understanding of variability and fluidity in family experiences related to divorce. Of course, our focus on variability and fluidity is not new, but we place these dynamic dimensions in the foreground of scholarly attention in novel ways (see Chapter 2).

The book is divided into three parts. Part I contains three chapters devoted to the building blocks of scholarly inquiry—theoretical orientations, research methods, and context. Chapter 2 focuses on the theory building block and how it helps to guide our examination and advance our understanding of divorce. The key purpose of this chapter is to present our model (the divorce variation and fluidity model; DVFM) of how adjustment to divorce unfolds for adults and children; this model, as the reader will see, emphasizes our themes of variability and fluidity in the divorce process. We also describe how our model was informed by several theoretical perspectives that are commonly utilized in the study of divorce and its consequences. Chapter 3 focuses on the methodological building block by reviewing quantitative and qualitative research methodologies that have been used to study divorce. This chapter concludes with some new approaches that are necessary for studying divorce in a dynamic manner. Chapter 4 addresses yet another key building block—the societal context within which divorce unfolds. In this chapter, we consider changing values regarding marriage, divorce, and cohabitation; historical changes in divorce; the cross-cultural context; and the legal environment in which divorce occurs. Thus, Part I provides readers with the theoretical, methodological, and contextual tools necessary to understand the empirical evidence on the divorce process presented in the

chapters in Part II and the implications for theory, research, practice, and policy described in Part III.

Part II contains five chapters describing variations in the divorce process and the multiple pathways characterizing the experience of divorce. Chapter 5 reviews the literature on variations in predissolution family environments and trajectories, with discussions of parent–child relations, marital relations, and children’s and adults’ adjustment during the period leading up to marital dissolution. We describe a range of factors associated with both declining marital satisfaction and an increased probability of divorce. Chapter 6, authored by Stephanie Rollie, focuses on variations in separation and uncoupling experiences, including discussion of common trajectories characterizing the separation process and the range of emotions that individuals experience. Chapter 7 discusses variations in and the fluidity of adults’ adjustment to divorce, Chapter 8 examines the voluminous and controversial literature on variations in and the fluidity of children’s and young adults’ adjustment to parental divorce, and Chapter 9 analyzes children’s and adults’ experiences of multiple family transitions, such as experiencing multiple divorces, marriages, and transitions in and out of cohabitation. The latter chapter reviews literature related to how experiencing more than one family or parenting transition can affect family members’ adjustment.

The final part of the book, Part III, consists of a single comprehensive chapter—Chapter 10—that provides guidance for future scholarly and applied work on divorce. This chapter considers implications for continued expansion of our theoretical model, suggestions for future research, recommendations for applied professionals (i.e., clinicians and parent educators who work with divorcing parents), and reflections on needed policy reforms. The implications for practice are directed at the individuals and families that educators and clinicians are ultimately trying to help, while the policy considerations are designed to make policies more sensitive and responsive to the needs and experiences of divorced adults and children.