

April 13, 2004

Divorce II

Read:

Arendell: The Social Self as Gendered: A Masculinist Discourse of Divorce

Cherlin: Going to Extremes: Family Structure, Children's Well-Being, and Social Science

Amato: The Consequences of Divorce for Adults and Children

- I. Divorce is a major, if not the major, debate in research on the family
 - A. Especially the short-term and long-term effects of divorce on children
 - B. Both Cherlin and Amato illustrate the difficulty of finding *causes* when looking at human behavior
 1. What produces some of these difficulties?
 - a. Multiple variables, multiple possible sources of influence
 - 1) For example: following divorce there is a pattern of some little boys "acting out" and being very aggressive
 - 2) Is it simply boys' basic aggressivity, and the mother is less capable of dealing with it immediately following separation, so she notices it more and it has more negative consequences?
 - 3) Is it a "vicious cycle of coercion" in which the mother facilitates reproduction of the behavior?
 - 4) Or is some of it society-induced in the sense of seeing it this way
 - a) Viewers of videos of little boys judged the boys to be more pathological when viewers were informed he was child of a single mother
 - b) Such ideas penetrate, permeate everywhere
 - c) And can have a self-fulfilling prophecy effect—on the mothers, for instance

- 5) Remember the article that showed children of divorced parents whose mothers were employed commenting on wanting more attention from their *fathers*?
 - a) This possibility doesn't occur to anyone until we ask
 - b) Our ideology leads us to focus on mothers as the problem, as not providing enough attention to the child
- b. Variables that influence each other
 - 1) Amato's point that mediators can be viewed as outcomes in their own right (p. 194)
 - a) Impact of divorce on single mothers' standard of living
 - b) But the declining standard of living might have consequences for their sense of financial security, children's nutrition, opportunity to attend college
- c. Correlations ("associations") between variables, but cause and effect difficult to ascertain
 - 1) For example, families ending up in divorce show a higher tendency to:
 - a) Marry as teenagers
 - b) Marry because wife was pregnant
 - c) Less religious
 - 2) So perhaps these are factors—which were there from the very beginning—that produce the conflict and/or produce the difficulties children have, not the divorce itself
 - 3) Prospective studies showed that prior to divorcing
 - a) Eleven years earlier, three-year olds whose families eventually divorced were described as having behavior problems

- b) Their fathers were more likely to characterize themselves as often angry with their sons; both fathers and mothers reported more conflict with sons
 - 4) Maybe marital discord during the marriage produced the negative outcomes, not the divorce and post-divorce situation
 - 5) Amato's discussion of "selection" vs. divorce itself
 - a) The idea that within a population of married couples, the more poorly adjusted individuals are more likely to divorce
- d. Changes occur in the larger society in gender roles, in acceptability of divorce
 - 1) Makes comparing studies 10 years apart difficult
 - 2) Amato's point regarding keeping in mind the year the study was conducted is a good one
 - 3) As divorce became less stigmatized, negative effects of stigmatization probably lessened
 - 4) In addition, help for children of divorcing parents at school, and mandatory classes in parenting for divorcing parents, etc., probably ameliorated situation in many families as well
- e. Definition of terms can be another source of confusion
 - 1) For example, if we study whether prior marital strain produces negative effects as opposed to the divorce itself
 - 2) Yet Amato suggests seeing divorce as a process
 - a) That might have begun "years prior to final separation and legal dissolution"
 - b) It's a very reasonable point, but what if we're trying to compare effects of marital strain and the strain of divorce?
- f. Also, different research designs, technical terms, etc.

- 1) Amato: “meta-analysis” looks at many studies to conclude about certain aspects of divorce: consequences for the well-being of adults and children
 - 2) Looks at quantitative and qualitative data
 - 3) Several disciplines contribute to research on the family
2. Example: the problematic nature of Wallerstein’s findings
- a. She wrote best-selling books showing serious, long-term effects of divorce
 - b. For example, Wallerstein found that 34% of divorced parents answered “yes” to the question:
 - 1) “Since Jan. 1977...has the child had any behavior or discipline problems at school resulting in your receiving a note or being asked to come in and talk to the teacher or principle?”
 - 2) As contrasted to 20% of parents in intact marriages
 - 3) But 66% of children in divorced marriages did not seriously misbehave at school
 - 4) So there’s a higher correlation—14%—in divorced marriages, but that 66% is important
 - c. Wallerstein’s research population not representative—she ran a divorce clinic: divorcing couples sought her out
 - 1) Sample is biased
 - 2) And many of the parents had extensive psychiatric histories
 - 3) And no control group
 - d. Scholars critiquing the study say that the issue isn’t whether children suffer during a marriage breakup and retain painful memories
 - 1) Of course most of them by far do

- 2) The issue is whether this affects their ability to function as adults
3. Coontz's point: is the glass half empty or half full?
 - a. Children from divorced families twice as likely to have behavior problems (20 to 25% as opposed to 10)
 - b. 75 to 80% of children from divorced families *aren't* having problems
 - c. This figure is noteworthy, given all the upset and accompanying factors that cause stress:
 - 1) Sometimes change of residence, change of school, 70% partial or non support from divorced noncustodial fathers and loss of income in general, children encounter an altered parent just when they need maximum stability

II. Conclusions about divorce

- A. Divorce has been steadily increasing throughout the century; has leveled off last two decades
 1. Keep in mind demographic changes, indicated by Amato at beginning of his article
 2. 40% of children under age of 16 will experience a divorce
- B. Why such concern?
 1. The analogy is chemotherapy: no one wants it, but sometimes this is what's best for the individual
 - a. Problem is that divorce involves at least one other individual
 - b. And, as I indicated earlier, the debate about divorce is really mostly concerned with the effects on children
 2. Divorce's larger implications: the "family values" debate over what kind of society we are evolving into
 - a. Illustrated by Hackstaff's characterization as "divorce culture"

3. Conservatives stress the need to preserve the institution of marriage, and, some, the need to bring back the subordinate, at-home, economically dependent wife
 - a. Individuals don't live in a vacuum; so people perceive other people as wrongly influenced, as selfish, etc.
 - b. Example: a majority of women report being more satisfied with their family situation than they had been in the last year of their marriage
 - 1) Is this an example of selfishness, if children are in fact negatively affected?
 - 2) However, a happy mother certainly affects the well-being of her child
 - 3) And divorced mothers also say that parenting is easier without a nonsupportive spouse who undermines or disagrees with their parenting practices
 4. Challenges gender identities, as illustrated by Arendell
- C. Keep in mind that all of this research necessarily reflects ideology
1. We *care* about these issues in a way we do not care about a chemical reaction in a beaker
 2. Will probably emerge in the research if you look closely