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