

Changes in Parental Distress Following a Child's Divorce

by

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DISSERTATION TITLE

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# Changes in Parental Distress Following a Child's Divorce

Lisa Ann Elliott, Ph.D.

University of Nebraska, 2005

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Research in the area of parental distress following a child's divorce has been limited. In this study, changes in parental distress, contact and assistance between parents and children over a 6-year period are examined. Two-wave pooled time series data from the National Survey of Families and Households are used to examine 5,338 parent-child dyads drawn from 1,788 respondents who reported on relationships with their adult children. Stress and life course theories are used as a basis for modeling predictors of parental distress following a child's divorce.

The adult child's divorce was associated with significant long-term declines in their relationships with their parents as measured by contact and assistance. Declines in parental assistance were significantly greater for divorced sons than for daughters, but both experienced significantly greater declines than their married counterparts. The effects of divorce on parent-child contact were similar for sons and daughters. The effect of divorce on these measures of the parent-child relationship were not affected by whether there were grandchildren, nor did it matter whether it was a son or daughter who had children.

Child's divorce was not related to parent's distress. Further, decreases in contact and assistance were not associated with changes in parents' distress. These findings suggest that parents' well-being may be less closely tied to parent-child relations than some previous work has suggested, at least for parents under 65. Although the effect is

modest, analysis suggests that children's divorce is more stressful for older rather than younger parents.

A cross-sectional examination of the grandparent-grandchild relationship was included to probe differences between those with and without divorced children. The main finding of interest was that grandparents of divorced children have had primary care of a grandchild significantly more often than those without a divorced child. An examination the findings in light of previous work, along with suggestions for future research are presented.

PREVIEW

In recent decades, research concerning American family life has increasingly included intergenerational relations as an important component. Changes in longevity, marital patterns, geographical distance and cultural expectations have all framed the way in which we view family. This study contributes to research that evaluates how adult children's divorce impacts their parents and their children's grandparents using two waves of data from a national sample of 5,338 parent-child dyads. All selected respondents have at least one adult child about whom we have obtained information for both waves. This method will assist in investigating the relationship between a child's divorce and a parent's distress.

As the divorce rate rose, parents experienced a new strain -- the divorce of a child. Prior literature suggests that a number of factors contribute to parental distress following the divorce of an adult child. These include factors such as the parents' income, the child's gender and whether there are grandchildren. The custody situation of their grandchildren may also contribute to their distress (Kivnick, 1981; Kruk and Hall, 1995; Pillemer and Sutor, 1991).

A child's divorce can bring both instrumental and emotional concerns. Parental concern over a child's well-being following a divorce may bring anxiety. As well, a child's divorce may trigger feelings of disappointment or failure for the parent. Parents may also be called on to assist divorced children. Support may be monetary or instrumental, such as transportation, helping with errands, and child care. The ability of parents to provide their child with the type of support that child requires following a divorce will likely affect how parents cope with their child's divorce.

Because parents and children generally have strong ties, it is expected that they experience the consequences of each others' behavior for quite some time. A child's divorce certainly sets the stage for long-term familial consequences. Results in this body of work have been mixed. Some work has found that the parent-child relationship deteriorates post divorce (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1990; Spitze, Logan, Deane & Zerger, 1994; Umberson, 1992). Personal disappointment, intrusiveness and financial/residential dependency may lead to strained parent-child relationships. On the other hand, others report that relationships and contact improve following a divorce (Ahrons & Bowman, 1982; Cherlin & Furstenburg, 1986). The latter work typically argues that parent-child relations, particularly between mothers and daughters, are strengthened following a divorce.

Prior research has demonstrated that parents' influence can be important following a child's divorce. They often provide social support and financial assistance (Johnson, 1988) and child care (Myers and Perrin, 1993) as well as providing a stabilizing force within the family (Clingempeel, Colyar, Brand and Hetherington, 1992; Kennedy and Kennedy, 1993; Kivett, 1991). When grandchildren are involved, grandparents provide buffers between grandchildren and their parents as well as being in a position to negotiate with the parents. From the grandparents' perspective, previous studies in this area indicate that the single most important factor in maintaining contact with grandchildren is being the parent of the custodial parent (Creasey, 1993; Hilton and Macari, 1997; Kruk and Hall, 1995).

The past few decades have seen an increased interest in families in later life. One of these stages is grandparenthood, which is a likely event for American adults who reach

the later portions of the life cycle. Although one has little control over whether this status is achieved, it is one that has become increasingly popular to embrace. Increased longevity has played an important role in shaping the more central role that many grandparents now play in the lives of their grandchildren. Often, grandparents are present into grandchildren's early adult life. Although, grandparents are emotionally attached to grandchildren, expectations concerning practical support are ambiguous. Changes in women's roles, life-style changes, shifts in normative family values and older adult's greater health and activity have all contributed to greater ambiguity in the grandparent role. Greater financial freedom for older Americans has allowed them to be less dependent on their adult children. Part of this independence permits grandparents to be as involved or uninvolved as they want to be.

On the other hand, one of the most publicized shifts in the role of grandparenthood has been the increasing number of grandparents participating in raising their grandchildren, either part or full time. It is estimated that 3.9 million American children lived with their grandparents in 1997 (Bryson & Casper, 1999). This is a substantial increase from the 3.3 million reported in 1992. Of these, about 1/3 are in the sole custody of their grandparents (Fuller-Thomas, Minkler & Driver, 1994).

The increase of grandparents raising grandchildren has given rise to a policy drive to strengthen the rights of grandparents. Although much of this movement was initiated by grandparents with sole custody and those with sole responsibility without legal recognition, grandparents who felt entitled to their grandchildren in other ways have also become involved with this issue. In 1992 the first policy hurdle was completed when grandparents caring for grandchildren became eligible for financial assistance, health



insurance, education and legal services, child care and coverage under workplace care giver policies (Bryson and Casper, 1999).

This study will add to our understanding of how parental divorce affects the senior generation's distress and the grandparent/grandchild relationship utilizing both longitudinal and cross-sectional data. The limited amount of work on this topic is mostly from small convenience samples. This study seeks to add a national component to this body of research. It builds on prior work by assessing how the parent/adult child relationship changes following an adult child's divorce utilizing panel data. This study will examine what factors buffer or enhance the effects of an adult child's divorce. Specifically, it will examine changes in contact between parents and their adult children who do experience divorce and those who do not. The presence of children in the disrupted marriage may change the amount of assistance or contact the senior generation has with their adult child. Thus, it is important to examine whether the presence of grandchildren modifies the effect of child's divorce on their parent's distress.

Data collected in two waves from the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) are used for this study. This dataset is a nationally representative sample conducted at the University of Wisconsin. The first wave of data was collected in 1987-1988 (N=13,007) and the second wave collected in 1992-1994 (N=10,007). Having both waves of data available will prove advantageous in measuring shifts in parents helping behavior and contact with their adult children, while knowing which of their adult children experienced a divorce between waves. Further, NSFH provides a number of useful demographic and descriptive variables for both waves.

From all main respondents, a subsample was selected. Those included in the analysis are respondents who were reinterviewed at wave 2 and who had at least one married child at wave 1. Following these reductions, there are 1,788 respondents who report on 5,338 married adult children. Most adult children remained married between waves 1 and 2. Between waves 1 and 2, 4,666 adult children remained married, while 672 divorced or separated between waves. Thus, approximately 12% of the adult children who were married in time 1 were not by wave 2. Most children had children of their own in wave 2 (90%). Many had 2 children of their own (39% in wave 1, and 42% in wave 2).

The main objective of this study is test to whether children's divorces are distressing for their parents. Initial tests assess changes in the intervening variables of contact and assistance and whether changes are modified by gender or parental status. The next step examines changes in distress both directly and indirectly through contact and assistance. Again, I ask whether the child's gender or parental status modify distress that parents may experience following a child's divorce. Lastly, the grandparent/grandchild relationship will be analyzed directly. Because of limitations in the data, this last analysis will be limited to a cross-sectional sample.

## Chapter 2

### Theoretical Perspective and Literature Review

Several theoretical perspectives assist in understanding the impact that the divorce of an adult child, and particularly a child with children, has on a respondent's distress.

The basic tenets of these theories will be discussed as well as their relation to the topic at hand. Following a review of the theoretical perspectives, empirical work is reviewed that examines the effect of an adult child's divorce on the senior generation as well as literature on determinants of close grandparent-grandchild relationships.

#### Theoretical Perspectives

The field of psychology has dominated research on this aspect of family life, and much of the work relies on theories that are individualistic rather than societal in scope. Traditionally, stress theory is a psychological theory, and life course perspective is employed by family sociologists. Within the past two decades some family sociologists have added sociological components to stress theory. This form of stress theory, together with life course perspective, will guide this study.

#### *Stress Theory*

Historically, stress theory has contributed to research on family life as a tool for guiding empirical studies exploring family adjustment to various types of stressful events. The beginning of stress theory associated with family processes was initiated by Hill (Patterson and Garwick, 1994). This work was based on family separation and indicated a curvilinear pattern in which there was initial disorganization and recovery, followed by reorganization (McCubbin, 1979). McCubbin (1979) describes this as "families managing their internal affairs to maximize the flow of energy into the employment of

coping behaviors effective in diverting, reducing or possibly removing the source of stress” (p. 238). This model defined family experience narrowly. It focused solely on the family in relation to one specific stressor and the family’s reaction based on their available resources. This early model has evolved into a much more inclusive and flexible theory.

Modern stress theory varies, but the basic terminology and central tenets remain constant. The underlying theme is that people will experience disruptive events and transitions that cause change. These disruptions are termed stressors. The most widely used model of stress theory is based on the supposition that, in reaction to a stressor, people become vulnerable to the physical and psychological effects of stress. At this point, available resources affect how well one is able to cope. Pearlin et al. distinguish between two classes of mediating resources: social support and coping resources (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan, 1981). The use of “mediator” in stress theory differs from the word’s methodological definition. Within stress theory, mediator carries a generic function, referring to resources that both mediate and moderate the severity of a stressful event. According to stress theory mediators may occur before an event, after the stressors occur but before the effects have taken root, after strain begins though before self-concept declines, or before the stress outcome (Pearlin, et al., 1981).

Social supports include family, friends and organizations that make up a person’s social network. Pearlin et al. (1981) stipulate that the presence or number of people in this network does not guarantee support in times of need. Therefore, the quality of relationships is more crucial than the quantity of them. Coping resources are of four types. The first type consists of coping skills that are learned. Secondly, coping

behaviors can be categorized by function: modification of the situation, redefining the meaning of the problem, and managing the symptoms of stress. Thirdly, coping behaviors vary by specific stressor and social role. Lastly, coping is more effective when the stressor stems from an interpersonal source rather than an institutional one.

A key area of concern in this field is what happens when social support and coping resources are not adequate to enable one to deal with the stressor. The results of stress-buffering research have been mixed. At one time, it was assumed that people with lower self-esteem, less control over their circumstances and less social support would be more vulnerable to anxiety because they have fewer resources with which to respond to a stressor. Self-esteem is viewed as a particularly important mediator between social position and stress (Aneshensel, 1992). Some researchers have tested whether or not having two stress-buffering resources is enough to cope with a stressor (Thoits, 1991). Thoits (1991) found that low social support and low self-esteem explained one group's vulnerability to negative life events, however nothing was able to account for differential vulnerability by gender, age, marital status or SES, and she concludes from these results that we must take into account not only the specific groups being compared, but also the particular stressors being addressed.

Many working in this area have now determined that it is not the number or even the type of stressors that is important but the meaning of that stressor for the group involved (Menaghan, 1989; Thoits, 1991). Considering individual or group interpretation of a stressor shifts the definition of the stressor from common to unique. By doing so, community and cultural factors become a central part of the analysis, improving our interpretation of that group's ability to cope with stressors (Patterson, 2002).

Communities are also important in providing individuals and families with norms about how to cope with their particular stressor (McCubbin, 1979).

Vulnerability manifests itself in numerous ways depending on the particular individuals experiencing the stressor and the resources available to them. It has been argued that chronic stressors differ from temporary stressors in the effect that they have on coping strategies and requirements. Families experiencing chronic stressors, such as caring for a disabled child, rely heavily on the meaning-making process (Patterson & Garwick, 1994). Beyond the situation itself, they must permanently redefine themselves as well as their world view. Stressors that are viewed as temporary do not require such massive alterations.

For this study, respondents are believed to be experiencing a stressor as a result of their child's divorce. This hypothesis is supported by the modest amount of empirical research in this area (Hamon and Cobb, 1993; Greenberg and Becker, 1988). One study found that the nature of the child's divorce had an impact on how the parents interpreted the divorce itself (Hamon and Cobb, 1993). For example, if their child had suffered a spouse's abuse, infidelity or other traumatic experience, then the divorce was not viewed with such anxiety. However, if their child had perpetuated one of the above mentioned events, news of the divorce was much more stressful. A key stressor for grandparents was the custody issue and how that would affect their ability to maintain contact with grandchildren. Hagestad (1988) refers to transitions that result from someone else's actions as counter-transitions, attributing this particular stressor to an individual source rather than one of an institutional nature.

This study incorporates stress theory by hypothesizing that for people who have a divorced child, those with more resources (i.e., income, employment) will experience less distress. In addition to such resources possibly affecting a person's distress, how parents internalize their child's divorce and the strain which results, is likely to determine their ability of adapting to the stressor. This is difficult to measure and will not be a component of the present study. Increased as well as decreased contact between parents and their children following a divorce may be considered stressors as well.

#### *Life Course Perspective*

Life course perspective employs transitions and trajectories as key concepts. Transitions are discrete changes in status, and though the event itself may be of short duration, the consequences may be long lasting. Trajectories are long-term patterns. Because data are typically not available over extended periods, most research focuses on transitions, as will this study.

Transitions are important markers in the life course. Adult children marrying and having children of their own are certainly conventional enough events that they can be considered life course markers (George, 1993). This perspective helps to frame important links between roles across time. For example, if we know something about how one performs in the parental role, this may aid us in understanding the nature of how one will grandparent or even great-grandparent (Giarrusso, Silverstein and Bengtson, 1996).

One of the elements that life course perspective lends to this study is a framework for how the continuity of parent-child and grandparent-grandchild relationships is affected by unexpected transitions (i.e., divorce). It also provides some understanding of

how a person's current position in the life course trajectory affects a person's ability to provide resources for others. For example, whether one is in or out of the workforce will affect availability of time and perhaps availability of monetary assistance. Work careers are important pieces of information for interpreting how one participates and interacts with other aspects of their life, including family life (Elder, 1994).

*Theoretical frameworks and the current study*

Stress theory and life course perspective work together to build the framework for this study. Stress theory provides structure for understanding how critical a child's divorce may be for parents, particularly if resources are limited, while life course perspective frames both the significance of the trajectory disruption as well as considering resources in light of the parents' position in the life course including income, employment and age. The interest of this study lies in how distressful a child's divorce is to his/her parents. It is hypothesized that this event will result in stress, though distress is thought to hinge on several factors that may mitigate stress, such as changes in frequency of contact and assistance to children.

Parental resources may include monetary assistance or availability of time. Depending on the economic situation of the parents, adult children who require monetary support may present a significant stress to parents. If the adult child requires a lot of time from their parents (i.e., transportation or childcare), then parents may be more stressed particularly if they are still in the workforce.

One way to measure time spent assisting children is to assess time spent providing childcare. Though most grandparents occasionally watch grandchildren, grandparents who have to increase childcare responsibilities significantly will most likely have their



own lives and schedules disrupted, resulting in stress. Respondent's employment status is likely tied into their availability of both time and money.

Other measures of post divorce family changes include frequency of seeing and talking to children. Increases or decreases of contact are likely to lead to parental distress. Both measures of contact are considered key mediators of distress in this study.

Life course perspective consists of sequential transitions based on particular norms and timing. By focusing on the position in the life course of the parent, we are able to understand what other demands that person may have at that point in their life trajectory. For example, parents who are younger are more likely to be in the workforce, having a more flexible income if their divorced child requires monetary assistance. Younger parents are more likely to be in better physical health thereby being better able to provide childcare. In terms of mental health, younger parents may be less likely to feel that divorce is a failure or to view their child's divorce as their own failure (Johnson, 1988; Pillemer & Suitor, 1991).

In sum, stress theory explains how parents deal with the stressor of their children's divorce. Life course perspective assists our understanding of how the parental role is enacted in relation to one's current place in the life course. Together, these perspectives offer an avenue to examine stress following a child's divorce as both a generational effect and the ability to recover from a stressful event.

### **Demographics of Grandparenthood**

During the course of the past century, the demographic make-up of American society has shifted dramatically. Increases in life span and declines in child mortality and fertility have changed the structure of the modern family. Old age is now an expected

stage in the life course rather than a rarity, and more children have living grandparents.

For a child born to a 27 year old mother and a 30 year old father (assuming their own parents were of similar age when their children were born), 1900 mortality levels would result in 25% of children having all grandparents alive at the time of their birth (Uhlenberg, 1980). However, in 1976, about 66% of children born to similar-aged parents and grandparents would have all grandparents alive at the time of their birth. The difference in the number of grandparents alive as the grandchild matures is even more dramatic. For a grandchild who is 15, the probability of having at least 3 grandparents alive was 17% at the turn of the century and increased to 55% by 1976 (Uhlenberg, 1980). Changes in mortality have radically affected the likelihood that grandparents and grandchildren will have the opportunity to interact.

Even though grandparent's and grandchildren's lives were not as likely to overlap in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when it did occur, elderly parents were much more likely to live with their adult children (Ruggles, 1994). In 1880, over half of elderly white parents lived with an adult child. That percentage began to decline between 1910 and 1940 and has continued to decline (Ruggles, 1994). Although the long-term trend is less grandparent-grandchild coresidence, the last quarter century has seen a noticeable increase in the likelihood of children living with grandparents. A rapidly growing number of grandparents are now raising their grandchildren: 3.9 million children younger than 18 lived with their grandparents in 1997 (over 5% of all children under 18). In 79% of cases with coresident grandparents and grandchildren, grandparent(s) are the householders (Bryson & Casper, 1999). Grandparents raising grandchildren is a trend that has been increasing steadily since the 1970's. The 1990's witnessed the most marked climbs of this