Parental Divorce and Young Adult Children's Romantic Relationships: Resolution of the Divorce Experience

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Fifty-one romantically involved young Israeli adults, whose parents were divorced, were questioned about their romantic relationship, parents' conflict, and current feelings about and reconstruction of the divorce. An integrative perception of the divorce was found to be related to fewer problems and to higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, and intimacy in the relationship. Implications for research and intervention with young adults are discussed.

Research during the last decade has started to deal with the long-term impact of childhood family disruption on young adults' adjustment. Demographic surveys have shown that young adults who experienced parental divorce during childhood or adolescence had fewer years of education, earned less money, and were more likely to be unemployed (Amato, 1999). In addition, they were likely to have more sexual partners (Garbardi & Rosen, 1991) and to marry and bear children earlier than were young adults from non-divorced families (McLanahan & Bumpass, 1988). Data are accumulating that show higher rates of divorce among adult offspring of divorce than among those with no history of parental divorce (Amato, 1999).

This higher incidence of troubled marriages and divorce among this population has been attributed (Amato, 1999; 2000) to poorer parental models of interpersonal behavior, which may lead to difficulties in forming stable, satisfying, intimate, and trusting relationships with a spouse. Based on her seminal work, Wallerstein (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1999) observed that when her sample of children whose parents had divorced reached adulthood, many wondered about their own chances for love and commitment and their ability to make a decision about marriage. Also, many were fearful of disappointment, betrayal, and abandonment. These children’s stories over the years suggested that the internal developmental tasks of establishing intimacy with the opposite sex were burdened to some extent by the template of failed male-female relationships they carried with them (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1999, p. 84).

However, the research also suggested (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989) that experience of their parents' divorce may lead some children to be more sensitive to problems in relationships, and to make a greater commitment to solving them. Moreover, Wallerstein and Lewis (1998) reported that while some children of divorce struggle with the fear that their relationships will fail, as did their parents, many overcame their dread of betrayal to find loving partners and become successful, protective parents. Conceptually, it could be argued that some young people carry forward the less-than-optimal relationship template to which they were exposed in their family of origin, while others build their own more adaptive codes of relationships. How may the different outcomes be explained?
Differential reactions to and varying effects of past experiences can be elucidated through attachment theory. More specifically, a study of adults' attachment representation by Main, Kaplan, and Cassidy (1985) found that adults' reflections and evaluations regarding their childhood experiences, rather than the content of the experiences per se, affected their emotional bonds with their own children. People with highly unfavorable attachment-related experiences, who worked through them and could discuss them coherently ("earned-secure" people), have been found (Pearson, Cohn, Cowan, & Cowan, 1994) to be as sensitive and responsive to their children as have their counterparts with more favorable experiences, even when parenting under stressful conditions.

Resolution of negative past experiences is characterized by coherent speech when talking about the unfavorable experience (Main & Hesse, 1990), recognition of change since the event was experienced, and, above all, ability to understand the complexity of past events. Such resolution means that negative past experiences are less likely to color current perception of self and relationships adversely, and more likely to contribute to current understanding of relationships. Lack of such resolution is characterized by incoherent speech, insistence on inability to recall the events, or excessive preoccupation with them. This suggests that the negative experiences are still emotionally laden and therefore interfere with current functioning (Pianta, Marvin, Britner, & Borowitz, 1996).

From this, it may be inferred that in parental divorce, it is not just the actual loss or trauma that affects an individual's subsequent behavior, but also how that individual currently appraises and represents that loss or trauma. If the sense of loss attributed to divorce is addressed and resolved, individuals should be more psychologically free to pursue their goals.

Although cumulative evidence suggests that parental divorce is related to the quality of adult children's romantic relationships and marital stability, it appears that no previous research has examined the extent to which adult children resolve the experience of parental divorce. The study reported here, therefore, examined the role played by resolution of the divorce experience in mediating the effects of that experience. It focused on how organizational aspects of the divorce experience, plus the extent to which the experience was resolved, were related to the quality of the relationships young adults established with their romantic partners, after controlling for such demographic variables as age at the time of divorce, gender, and level of parental conflict (Amato, 1999). It was hypothesized that a more integrated and resolved pattern of appraising parental divorce would be related to more adaptive romantic relationships in young adulthood.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Data were collected from 51 Israeli college students (30 females and 21 males) whose parents were divorced. Purposive sampling techniques were used, and the research team posted notices throughout two universities in the center of Israel. Since more women than men responded, additional notices were posted so as to achieve a total of 21 male subjects.

None of the participants was married, but all had a romantic partner in a relationship that had lasted more than three months. Current age was 19–29 years (M=23.9), while mean age at time of parental divorce was 11.8 years, and mean duration of the romantic relationship was 23.4 months (SD = 18.4). Of their divorced parents, 23% of mothers and 63% of fathers had remarried. Most participants (72.5%) had been raised by their mothers, and a few were in either their father's or joint custody. The divorce rate in Israel during the last decade has reached 35–40% in nonreligious sectors (about 60%) of the population, bringing its social acceptability closer to that of other industrialized countries.

**Procedure and Measures**

Two modes were used to collect data for the study: interviews that were later transcribed and rated, and questionnaires.

**Interviews**

Interviews were held individually with each subject at their home or in a laboratory. During the first part of the interview, participants were asked to speak for five minutes about their romantic partner, telling "What kind of person your partner is, and how you get along together." The sessions were tape-recorded, transcribed, then rated independently by two raters on five scales adapted from Feeney and Noller (1991). The five-point rating scales were: Idealization (the extent to which the relationship was described as special or unique).
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Friendship, Enjoyment, Relationship Problems, and Trust. Agreement between raters ranged from .68 to .89; all disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

During the second part of the interview, participants were asked to respond to the following questions about their parents’ divorce: “Please describe your parents’ divorce: what you remember from that time, any specific memories”; “What is the meaning of the divorce to you?” “What do you think about it today?” Their replies were tape-recorded, transcribed, then rated independently by two raters on five scales developed by the authors in line with the salient topics found in the transcripts and with the study’s hypothesis, the latter suggesting an examination of ability to resolve the loss inflicted by the divorce and to perceive the divorce in a comprehensive manner.

The five-point rating scales were as follows: Integrative Perception of the Divorce (the degree to which the subject is aware of its complexity; is able to understand it from mother’s, father’s, and children’s perspective; and has a coherent view of the divorce); Sense of Loss in the Past; Sense of Current Loss; Anger; and Lack of Memory (the extent to which the subject is unable to remember details from the time of the divorce). Agreement between raters ranged from .67 to .84. All disagreements were discussed until consensus was reached.

Survey

Subjects also completed, in a single session, two questionnaires, one assessing their relationship with the romantic partner, the other the intensity of parental conflict during and after the divorce.

The first, the Triangular Theory of Love Scale (TTLS) (Sternberg, 1998), is a 45-item self-report measuring three components (15 items on each) of love: intimacy in emotion, passion in physical relations, and commitment in cognition. Participants were asked to rate each item on a nine-point Likert-type scale. Cronbach alpha coefficients for the three scales were above .90.

Items on the second scale, Parental Conflict, were adapted from the Interparental Conflict Questionnaire (ICQ) (Forehand & McCombs, 1989) to assess frequency of parental conflict (quarrels, arguments, “heated arguments,” etc.) at two points of time: during the divorce period, and three years after divorce. Subjects were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1–7, the frequency or intensity of the various indices of conflict. Cronbach alpha of the inventory at the two points of time was .81 and .64, respectively.

RESULTS

Prior to the analysis of the study’s main question—the influence of the resolution of the divorce experience on the romantic relationship—analyses were conducted to determine the role of demographic variables and parental conflict in those relationships.

Variables

Demographic

A set of t-tests was conducted to examine gender differences on the five indices adapted from Feeney and Noller (1991) of perception of the relationship with the romantic partner. A second set examined gender differences on the TTLS ratings. No significant gender differences were found in any of the eight items.

Pearson correlations between age of child at divorce and current perception of romantic relationships were computed. No significant correlations were found. Age of child at divorce was not found to be related to quality of romantic relationships in young adulthood.

A set of t-tests was conducted to compare quality of romantic relationships of young adults whose mothers stayed single with that of those whose mothers had remarried. The latter were found to enjoy their romantic relationships more than the former, $t=2.45$, $p<.05$; $M=4.55$ (SD=0.08) and $M=3.85$ (SD=0.10), respectively. In addition, young adults whose mothers had not remarried described more problems in their romantic relationships than did those whose mothers had remarried; $t=2.21$, $p<.05$; $M=2.51$ (SD=0.11) and $M=1.70$ (SD=0.09), respectively. No association between current paternal marital status (remarried versus not remarried) and young adults’ quality of romantic relationships was found.

Parental Conflict

Significant correlations were found between level of parental conflict during divorce, as reported on the adapted ICQ, and two aspects of current romantic relationships, as reported on the TTLS: a higher level of conflict during divorce was related to higher levels of intimacy and passion with the romantic partner; $r=.28$ ($p<.05$) for both.
Current Perception of Parental Divorce

Pearson correlations between current perception of divorce and quality of relationships with romantic partner were computed. As can be seen in Table 1, a more integrative perception of the divorce was related on the indices adapted from the Feeney and Noller scale (1991) to higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, and trust in the romantic relationships, and to a lower level of relationship problems. Conversely, difficulties in remembering details of the divorce were related to less trust in the romantic partner. No significant associations were found between current perception of the divorce and the three aspects of love—intimacy, passion, commitment—on the TTLS.

To control for the possible contribution of other variables to the quality of romantic relationships among young adults, a hierarchical regression was performed. First, demographic variables (gender, age at the time of divorce, and current maternal and paternal marital status) and the two measures of parental conflict (during the divorce and three years after divorce) were inserted prior to the insertion of level of integrative perception of the divorce. Results indicated that, even after controlling for these variables, the description of an integrative perception of the divorce was related to greater friendship ($\beta=.34$, $p<.05$) and enjoyment ($\beta=.51$, $p<.01$), and to fewer problems ($\beta=-.42$, $p<.01$) in the romantic relationship. Integrative perception of the divorce explained 9%–13% of the quality of the relationship with a romantic partner.

Additional hierarchical regressions were conducted to learn whether integrative perception of divorce explained the three young adult love types on the TTLS after controlling for the demographic variables and the two indices of conflict. Results showed that the description of an integrative perception of the divorce explained 9% of intimacy with the romantic partner ($\beta=.35$, $p<.05$).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RELATION FACTOR</th>
<th>INTEGR. PERSP.</th>
<th>PAST LOSS</th>
<th>CURRENT LOSS</th>
<th>ANGER</th>
<th>LACK OF MEMORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Idealization</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>0.32*</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment</td>
<td>0.48*</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>0.40*</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05; **p<.01.

DISCUSSION

Unexpectedly, the results of this study showed that sense of loss or anger associated with parental divorce were not related to the quality of offspring’s romantic relationships during young adulthood (see Table 1).

As hypothesized, an integrative perception of divorce was found to be related to higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, and intimacy, and to fewer problems in young adults’ romantic relationships. The appraisal of the events is probably more important that their mere occurrence (Kurdek, 1993). When re-examining stressful events, individuals may focus not only on painful feelings in the past, but also on the future and its possibilities. Such an attitude facilitates the search for new perspectives and acknowledgment of change, without denying reality. This is consistent with ideas found in attachment theory suggesting that representations of former experiences are governed by organizational principles that may be helpful in dealing with past trauma (Main & Hesse, 1990; Main et al., 1985).

In contrast, people who refrain from dealing with the past trauma tend to exhibit problems later: the results of the present study showed that difficulties in remembering details of the divorce were related to less trust toward the romantic partner.

Painful feelings, then, are not necessarily associated with pathology (Emery & Forehand, 1996). Arditti and Prouty (1999) showed that divorce can also offer new alternatives for family members and may thus be related to renewal, as well as loss. Similarly, divorce has been conceptualized as a transformation in family relations that should not be perceived only in terms of deficit (Stewart, Copeland, Chester, Malley, & Barenbaum, 1997).

Another factor that contributed to a higher quality of the participants’ romantic relationships was their mother’s marital status. Maternal remarriage was related to young adults’ higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, intimacy, and passion, and fewer problems in their romantic relationships. Previous studies on the role of remarriage of custodial parents in children’s life have produced mixed findings. In his study on the impact of remarriage on young adult children, Aquilino (1998) found no difference in quality of relationships reported by children in single-mother and custodial remarried-mother families. However, mothers’ remarriage was related to a significant decrease in frequency of contact with adult children. As already noted, the event per se is likely to be less important than
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its meaning. When a mother has remarried, her young adult child may understand that divorce is not only a loss but carries new possibilities for marital life, as well. Under these circumstances, negative expectations and attitudes about marriage may change—a speculation that awaits examination in further research.

Results showed that several indices on the quality of romantic relationships measure were related to level of integrative perception of divorce. However, trust and commitment between romantic partners were not explained by such a perception. It would be reasonable to assume that an integrative approach facilitates interaction between partners so that they enjoy the relationship more and experience fewer problems. Trust and commitment, however, are probably more difficult to achieve. Of young adults whose parents had divorced, 82% indicated that they did not fully trust their dating partner, and feared to commit themselves to a serious relationship (Duran-Aydintug, 1997).

Because of its design, the study’s findings did not tell us what factors contribute to the development of an integrative perception of divorce. No association was evident between level of integrative perception of divorce and child’s age at divorce, child’s gender, current parental status, or even parental conflict. From a social constructionist approach, it is probable that as children grow older they are more capable of interpreting and reconstructing their personal experience of parental divorce, as well as of understanding the meaning of divorce in society (Arditti & Prouty, 1999; Kunde, 1993), but this assumption needs to be tested in further research.

The results of this study did not point to a major role for parental conflict in young adults’ romantic relationships. Moreover, the two significant findings showed that a higher level of parental conflict during divorce was related to higher levels of intimacy and passion with a romantic partner in young adulthood. This finding is counterintuitive. However, it is possible that a high level of friction in parental divorce gives impetus to leaving the family and trying to establish a different relationship with a romantic partner. Current study results cannot tell us whether the higher intimacy and passion with a romantic partner reflected a mature relationship or dependency upon the partner.

An important limitation of this study must be considered. Participants were young adults involved in a romantic relationship. Consequently, the role of an integrative perception of divorce among young adults without a romantic relationship, or whose relationship lasted less than three months, remains unknown. Results can be generalized only to young adult children of divorce who have been able to establish a romantic relationship lasting at least three months.

Implications for Practice

There is a vast literature on intervention methods with families of divorce during and after divorce. Less attention has been paid to the needs of young adult children of divorce, and intervention methods with them have emerged mainly from a deficit model. For example, Hage and Nosanow (2000) presented a psychoeducational group intervention whose goals included reducing isolation, establishing connectedness, and teaching communication skills and assertiveness. Results of the study reported here suggest that it is important to work with young adults on how they perceive parental divorce, cope with the sense of loss, and arrive at a new and comprehensive understanding of the divorce and its role in their lives. Overcoming the sense of trauma can offer renewal in life and increased sense of agency.

References


