Case/Comment

Children of Divorce

A Review of the Psychological Literature

INTRODUCTION

The incidence of divorce has jumped 125% in the past 16 years (Bureau of the Census, 1977). The rise from 2.2 divorces per 1000 population in 1960 to 5.0 per 1000 in 1976 is a national trend which shows no sign of declining (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976). At present, 60–75% of divorces involve children under age 18, indicating that one million children annually experience the divorce of their parents, as well as the attendant problems of custody and visitation decisions.

The popular myths about divorce include the notions that children reared in one-parent homes are more likely to be delinquent, sexually maladjusted, underachievers, and emotionally unstable (cf., Gettleman & Markowitz, 1975). Metz (1968) wrote, “Children with a father in the home generally have higher ratings on intelligence tests than children living without a father” but offered no evidence for this claim. Doppler (1973) pointed to the fact that most mothers get custody as a cause for the current drug abuse, campus unrest, juvenile delinquency, and high venereal disease rates in our society. Finally, Rutter (1971) recalled the conclusion of a W.H.O. Expert Committee (W.H.O., 1951) on the question of children’s need for an always-present mother. The committee reported that the use of day care caused “permanent damage to the emotional health of a future generation” (p. 233). The purpose of this comment is to contrast the popular mythos with results of the best research on children of divorce.

Principal questions addressed are: What are the typical reactions of children to the divorce of their parents? To what degree has divorce been shown to harm children, and which aspect of divorce is the major stressor? What are the implications of these findings for clinicians, researchers, and lawyers?

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

One way to assess the impact of a life stressor is to examine the frequency of its presence among those who seek professional treatment. Bloom (1975), for example, has shown that the rate of divorced men seeking psychiatric help is 18 times the rate
for married men. Is this the case for children of divorce as well? The answer seems less clear. Despert (1962) and Westman (1970) found an underrepresentation of children of divorce in their clinics. Despert reported that in each of the 1000 cases she examined, family discord had been present, but that the number of families who actually divorced was fewer than the proportion in the total population. Other studies (e.g., McDermott, 1970; Tuckman, 1966) have found an overrepresentation of children of divorce in their clinics. Kalter (1977), who found twice as many such children in his clinic as exist in the population, included in his sample children living with step-parents, as a result of earlier divorce. The most common problem among all age groups was aggression — from tantrums to delinquent behavior. Unfortunately, Kalter does not mention the breakdown according to socioeconomic status (SES) in his sample. Since we know that low SES groups have higher incidences of divorce (Pope & Mueller, 1976) as well as many other psychosocial problems (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958), the symptoms he observed might be caused by the stress of inadequate resources as much as by divorce if Kalter’s sample were largely low income. Thus the evidence is mixed that children whose parents divorce are more often brought for psychological treatment than their nondivorced peers. Important questions at this juncture are: how do children respond to parental divorce, and what is it about marital dissolution that may cause problems? Methodologically, the literature can be divided into the studies of clinical and those of nonclinical populations.

**CLINICAL STUDIES**

Westman (1972) described the effects of divorce he observed among a psychiatric population, emphasizing the psychosexual stage at which the divorce occurred. In infancy, the effects of divorce “are indirect but often potent.” According to Westman, although the child cannot at this age be aware of the meaning of the parental absence, the depression of the mother may affect the infant. She may feel resentment about the loss of her husband, or about the complications which the child represents in her life. The mother may displace hostility for her spouse on to the child. Or, as Klatskin (1972) has suggested, she might transfer love for the divorced spouse on to the child in the form of overprotection. Both authors point out that children are extremely sensitive to the subtle cues about the way they are held, fed, and spoken to. Another problem is that older siblings who are grieving the loss of a parent, but who cannot express openly their anger, may displace their feelings through mistreatment of the baby. Westman concluded that divorce may result in an “impaired sense of comfort with the self, body and the world — sometimes referred to as basic trust (p. 46).”

According to Westman, most divorces tend to occur during the child’s preschool years which is potentially the worst time to lose a parent. It is at this time that the divorce will have the most profound effects on sexual identity. This is the oedipal stage, when the child forms an attraction for the parent of the opposite sex and harbors an unconscious wish for the removal of the same-sex parent. When divorce occurs, with one parent leaving the home, the child inevitably feels that the oedipal wish is responsible. Westman stated that profound guilt will ensue for children of both sexes. Moreover, the male child will be beset with fantasies of omnipotence at getting rid of the father. This may lead to hypermasculinity, e.g., the acting out of aggressive im-
pulses in adolescence and adulthood. For the girl, the fact that her role model has not been successful at maintaining a relationship may cause her to doubt her own ability to do so. Westman wrote, “An illustration of the extent to which a child may link his own sexuality with the divorce and departure of father is the question posed to a mother by her 5-year-old son: “Will Daddy come home if I cut off my penis?” (p. 47). The child’s feeling that (s)he is responsible for the divorce may also be manifested in subtler ways. The child may tell the therapist, for example, that his parents divorced “because I was bad” or “Daddy went away because I’m dumb” (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976).

The school-age child, according to Westman, is less likely to misinterpret the divorce, but the felt personal loss is great at this age. It is at this time that a depressive reaction is typical. Disinterest in school and a tendency to withdraw may be expected. At this age the child has finally resolved the oedipal conflict. For the boy, who has given up strivings for mother, divorce at this age means loss of father as well. Some children at this age may become outspoken, expressing exaggerated bitterness and threats of running away from home.

In adolescence divorce has the least effect on personality development, as the character is pretty well formed by this time. The risk at this age is more that actions will be precipitated which could have long-range effects on self-image (e.g., juvenile delinquency and illegitimate pregnancy). The adolescent is likely to have strong convictions about the divorce itself and will be concerned for the welfare of younger siblings. Strong emotions are mobilized in children of this age group, but can be resolved much more easily than in younger children. Still, because the adolescent goes outside the home for comfort, advice, and nurturance, there is a “perpetuation of early marriage and later divorce” (p. 54).

Westman’s work is helpful in providing the rich descriptive accounts that only close experience with such children can generate. He offers some clear allusions to psychoanalytic theory to explain his observations. The limitation of this work is that it derives conclusions from a clinical sample, i.e., from the most distressed members of the divorced population. Moreover, Westman failed to report evidence against his position. The only empirical work he cited was the study by Freud and Burlingham (1944), who reported that children without fathers during World War I developed elaborate stories of fantasy fathers. The author warned of the pathological effects of identifying with a fantasy father. He did not, however, discuss the confounding impact of deprivation due to war-time circumstances in the Freud and Burlingham study.

A similar kind of criticism can be made of the work of Goldstein, Freud, and Solnit (1973), who take a most extreme view of the adverse effects of separation and divorce. The authors in fact chose not to write in terms of the “best interests of the child” but of the “least detrimental alternative.” Goldstein et al. emphasize the concept of continuity of care, i.e., stability and uninterrupted support from external sources. They explicitly state that the custody decree must be final and not subject to modification. The authors maintain, moreover, that it should be up to the custodial parent, and not the court, to decide on visitation rights. The book is methodologically weak. For example, the authors’ assertion that “The prolonged absence or death of one parent may place the child at risk” is based on the fact that 29% of children seen in the Child Psychiatry unit of the Yale Study Center came from one-parent homes. As Katkin, Bullington, and Levine (1974) in their critique of Goldstein et al. point out,
however, it is not clear that the Yale clinic rate is abnormally high, considering that the divorce rate approaches 33% in some SES groups. Katkin et al. wrote:

Can more than just a few days at Grandma’s while Momma is ill and hospitalized or even happy and vacationing, actually be destructive? ... Goldstein et al. argue that in a short time the child’s psychological ties to its natural parents can be broken and replaced by new ties to interim caretakers who would then have a first right to custody. Surely so large a shift in policy requires more than mere assertion [p. 574].

The only empirical studies cited by Goldstein et al. are those by Bowlby (1952) and by Spitz (1946) on maternal deprivation. Goldstein et al. failed to mention Pinneau’s (1955) critique of Spitz’s work or Herzog and Sudia’s (1973) exhaustive review of the father absence literature which generally challenges their own position.

A clinical study with more guarded conclusions is that by Tooley (1975). The author observed a number of boys, aged 4–7, referred to a clinic and described as “aggressive, bossy, defiant, and what one would call ‘pre-delinquent’.” Tooley explained the children’s behavior in terms of the plight of the newly divorced mother. The average income of the mothers of these boys plunged from $12,000 to $5000 after divorce. The new divorcee, observed Tooley, faces the anxiety-provoking situation of finding a job in a discriminatory job market; she may be making independent decisions for the first time and may be weathering the attitudes of doctors, service-men, etc., who treat nonmarried women differently from the married. Tooley suggested that the child may well be sensitive to the threatening new world his mother faces and that he may act in a counterphobic way to protect himself. These children in therapy talked of beating up older children, of building “fighting machines,” and, in general, bragged about their own destructiveness. The author’s approach as a clinician in these situations was to see the mother and children together — at least for diagnostic sessions. As mothers gained a sense of strength and competence and conveyed more certainty to their children, the violent counterphobic behavior subsided.

The studies of clinical samples tend to emphasize the pathognomonic, and not the coping, aspects of children dealing with divorce. Such studies are important in defining the limits of aberrant behavior that will occur among the population of children of divorce. However, these studies leave unanswered the question of how children who are not brought for treatment respond to divorce.

NONCLINICAL STUDIES

Kelly and Wallerstein in a series of publications (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1976, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977) describe their Children of Divorce Project, designed to study the impact of divorce on “normal” families following divorce and one year later. One hundred thirty-one families were seen by an interdisciplinary team for 4–6 sessions over a 6-week time span. Data were obtained through clinical observations and interviews of both child and parent. No quantifiable measures were attempted. The authors were interested in examining the children’s reactions, according to their age at the time of divorce. The authors provide clinical vignettes of the children observed. To summarize briefly their descriptions: (1) behavior of the preschooler at intake seemed “regressive, confused and fretful.” (2) Early latency children expressed pervasive sadness and were most aware of their suf-
The authors contend that these children are in the worst position of all. Their ego structure is such that they cannot use denial (as do preschoolers) alternately with the experience of suffering to titrate their pain. Fear of deprivation was expressed by preoccupation with food, clothes, and toys. (3) The later latency children coped with the divorce by openly expressing anger and often aligning with one parent in favor of the other. (4) Adolescents had developed the cognitive complexity to understand the meaning of the divorce and to have an opinion about it. They could and did verbalize their anger and sadness about the divorce. At the one-year follow-up, 20-40% of all children seen seemed worse than at intake. This trend was concentrated among the younger children. For the adolescents, not only had all resolved their loyalty conflicts, but most showed heightened empathy and compassion for their parents.

The strengths of this study are: (1) The entire family was seen, and not just the "problem child." This is important in understanding how family dynamics moderate or exacerbate the divorce experience for the child. (2) The study involves a follow-up.

The limitations of this work, however, are serious. Despite the fact that the authors were aiming for a normal sample, and even turned away families with previous psychiatric complications, it is probable that their sample overrepresents the most distressed divorced families. The authors report that families were seen for an average of 14.2 hours in 6 weeks. This is positive in that it ensures a thorough examination of families. One must consider, however, that 14.2 hours is a large time commitment for a family to make in the interest of science. The interviews were done at a California Community Mental Health Center, and, since participants were not paid, they may have been motivated by the hope of receiving help from the clinical team. Indeed, participants were told that the researchers would be available for help during the interim year (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1977, p. 8). In situations where the divorce is handled in a civil manner and children adjust quickly, parents would be less inclined to participate in this demanding study. A most important question with regard to their results, however, is how long the problems shown by these children will endure.

A study with 2-year follow-up was done by Hetherington et al. (1976), who compared 48 families in which parents divorced with 48 intact families — each of which had one child of nursery-school age. The investigators' multimethod approach involved: interviews with parents, parental diary-keeping, parental checklists of children's behavior, battery of psychological tests, and waiting-room observations of each parent interacting with the child. Divorced parents showed less affection toward their children and a lack of control over them in comparison with intact families. Independent raters who were blind to the marital status of the parents rated divorced children as obeying fewer commands than intact children. Differences were greatest during the first year, and a reequilibration took place by the end of the second year. The authors report that when support and agreement occurred between divorced couples, the disruption in family functioning appeared less extreme, and the restabilizing of family functioning occurred by the end of the first year. They do not report how many such families were seen. These results form an interesting extension of the Kelly and Wallerstein data in that, despite regression at the one-year mark, the 2-year follow-up shows marked improvement. This improvement did not compensate completely for the disruption, however; at the two-year mark, the divorced families were still significantly less affectionate and the children still obeyed less often than controls.
The Hetherington et al. study has several methodological strengths. (1) It included a control group of nondivorced families. (2) It provided a one- and 2-year follow-up. (3) It studied a discrete age range (nursery school), thereby avoiding confounds with age. (4) It included actual observations of children interacting with parents. Such observations, coded by blind raters are much less subject to investigator bias than are interviews.

As in the case of Kelly and Wallerstein, however, the completeness of Hetherington et al. is both a strength and a limitation. Again one must ask what would motivate newly divorced parents, who may be involved with legal settlements, moving, changing jobs, and emotional adjustment, to give so much time to this study. A possibility that needs to be ruled out is that the sample is composed of parents having the most difficulty with their children's adjustment, and who hoped for help from the professionals studying them.

A study by Felner et al. (1975) of 800 primary-grade children cannot be criticized for selectively sampling the most distressed. Teachers' ratings of children ages 5–10 revealed that children whose parents had divorced showed significantly more acting-out behavior than controls and more acting-out than children who had lost a parent through death. Children who had lost a parent through death were rated as more "anxious, depressed, and withdrawn" than divorced or control children. One methodological problem with the study is that teachers were not blind to the family status of the children they were rating. Cultural stereotypes regarding children from "broken homes" might have influenced their judgments. If teachers respond differently to children they label as more acting-out or withdrawn (e.g., expect less of them), it really does not matter, from the child's point of view, how valid the teachers' assumptions are regarding "broken homes." On the basis of these findings, children were referred to a preventive school-based program. The locus of intervention ensures that those children who would not end up in counseling would at least receive some extra attention at school. The effectiveness of this intervention has not yet been evaluated.

The difference in behavior between children with divorce and death in their history is salient in the Felner et al. study and in others (e.g., Kalter, 1977; cf., Herzog & Sudia, 1973). Studies reviewed thus far strongly suggest that divorce is a major stressor for many children, but it is not clear what aspect of divorce is stressful. Divorce can be thought of as generating two kinds of changes: parental absence (usually of the father) and sufficient parental disagreement to occasion the break-up. The studies on father absence and those concerning the impact of parental conflict will help illuminate the question of why divorce hurts children.

**Father Absence**

According to Herzog and Sudia (1973) professionals tend to assume that father absence leads to school problems, delinquency, and improper sex-role identity.

**School Problems.** Mackie et al. (1967) found that father-present boys performed better on academic tests than father-absent boys. However, the father-present group also had an average per capita income twice as high as those with the father absent. Income statistics are relevant to many studies in this review, since the Bureau of Census (1968) reported that the proportion of female-headed households (white and
Several studies have noted a negative relationship between father absence and school performance, when certain familial characteristics were taken into account. Sutton-Smith et al. (1968) compared the college entrance scores of lower-middle- and middle-class freshmen according to whether or not their fathers had been absent for 2 or more years of their lives. Their findings included the following: (1) The first-born father-absent children scored lower than first-born father-present children. (2) There was no difference between the scores of second-born children on the father-absence variable. (3) Father absence due to divorce had the most negative effect in the first two years of the child’s life. (4) Father absence due to death was most adverse if it occurred when the child was 6–9 years old. Santrock (1972) also found the achievement and IQ scores of both boys and girls to be depressed only if father absence had occurred in the early years of the child’s life. These studies seem to point toward a kind of critical period during which a child is most vulnerable to father absence.

A number of studies have failed to find a relationship between father absence and school performance (e.g., Burchinal, 1964; Wasserman, 1972), however, while a study by Wilson (1967) produced a convoluted set of results. Subjects were 2600 children selected to represent whites and nonwhites from various neighborhoods. Children from broken homes numbered 22% of the black sample and 9.5% of the white sample. When the low SES students with high grades in English were compared, both black and white father-absent boys scored better than father-present boys. On the other hand, verbal test scores at different grade levels showed the father-absent boys to be significantly higher in grade 3, the father-present boys significantly higher in grade 6, and insignificant differences in grades 1 and 8 — results so mixed as to defy interpretation.

Herzog and Sudia (1973), in reviewing the mixed evidence on father absence, concluded that father absence per se does not seem to be a good discriminator of academic problems. Factors such as SES, sex, age, time of separation from father, and attitudes toward achievement of mother are all likely to influence the child’s outcome but at this point are not clearly understood.

**Sex-Role Identification.** Probably the best known studies of the relationship between father absence and sexual identity are those by Tiller (1957) done on sons of Norwegian sailors, and by Ancona, Cesa-Bianchi, and Boquet (1963) on sons of Genoan sailors. In both cases fathers were absent from the home for 1–2 years at a time. Doll-play tests and interviews showed that Norwegian boys showed immaturity, dependency, insecure masculine identification, and evidence of compensatory masculinity. The Genoan study, however, showed no difference on masculine identification between father-absent and father-present boys. Differences in the two results were explained in terms of the mothers’ role in each situation. Whereas the tradition in Genoa confers responsibility and independence on the wife, the Norwegian mores condition the wife to be more passive and restricted. Herzog and Sudia (1973) commented that there is “all the more question about generalizing the reactions of upper-middle class Norwegian boys to low-income black boys in inner cities of the United States” (p. 172).

A pervasive problem with the sex-role studies is the nature of the testing instruments. Other investigators using doll play have found, in contrast to Tiller (1957),
greater independence in father-absent boys (e.g., Lynn & Sawrey, 1959; Baker, 1967). Projective tests allow a highly subjective interpretation from the examiner. If the father-absent child chooses the father doll, it could be interpreted in a variety of ways: e.g., that the child misses his father, that he is identifying appropriately with his father, or that he is showing compensatory masculine identity. Moreover, even if these results were consistently interpretable, one would need to make another leap to suggest that these differences are meaningful in later life. Indeed, such leaps are often made by social scientists, as in the case of the math-verbal reversal studies. On college board exams, girls typically do better on verbal than on mathematical portions, whereas the reverse is true for boys. Several investigators (e.g., Altus, 1958; Carlsmith, 1964) reported that father-absent boys score higher on verbal than on math portions. Both investigators interpreted this reversal as evidence of inadequate masculine identity. In the Altus study, in the cases of reversal, the verbal score was elevated, and so one must ask, in the words of Herzog and Sudia (1973): "If growing up without a father . . . makes a boy just as good in mathematics and better in verbal activities, should this be scored as a net loss for him?" (p. 177). In fact, few investigators in this area of research carefully define their concept of masculinity. As Levine (1976) has asked, "If, for example, an ‘unmasculine self-concept’ means warmth, kindliness and sensitivity to others rather than machismo, is this a sign of deviance?" (p. 10).

Delinquency. Turning to delinquency, among the best-known studies is that of Glueck and Glueck (1962), who studied adolescent boys committed for delinquency and a control group matched on age, IQ, and race. Father absence was found in 61% of delinquents and 34% of nondelinquents. However, 14 other factors significant at the .01 level showed a larger percent difference between experimental and control groups. Nye (1958) and Slocum (1963) also found delinquency to be significantly related to father absence. Ferguson (1952) and McCord et al. (1962), however, found it non-significant. The McCords studied 10- to 15-year-old father-absent and father-present boys in low-income families. The highest delinquency rates (43%) were found among intact homes in which parents continuously and openly quarreled. The next highest rate (20%) came from broken homes. In intact, tranquil homes, the rate was 18%.

Moreover, when Herzog and Sudia (1973) tallied the studies supporting the classic view that fatherless homes are associated with negative characteristics in the child vs. those which challenged this position, they found 24 supporters and 20 challengers. Sixteen studies were too mixed or qualified to count on either side. Thus, marital turbulence might be a better predictor of children’s pathology than marital dissolution. Studies of divorced families which have focused on the conflict variables will be considered next.

Parental Conflict

Rutter (1971) studied 200 English families of newly referred psychiatric patients who had one or more children under 15 years. A control group of children matched on age, sex, and SES was employed. The diagnosis of the parental illness and the sex of the ill parent bore no relation to the likelihood of the child developing a psychiatric disorder. However, a strong relationship emerged between the quality of family rela-
tionships and disorder in children. The parental marriage rating was based on a parent- 
tal interview covering frequency of quarreling, the amount of warmth between hus-
band and wife, and hostility and criticism expressed by each about the other. Rutter 
found the highest frequency of antisocial behavior to be associated with: (1) a “poor 
marrige” and (2) separation from both parents. If the marriage was rated “fair” or 
“good,” there was no relationship between separation from one or both parents and 
antisocial behavior. An intriguing result of this study is the sex difference: the 
marrige rating bore no relation to the rate of disorder in girls, but only in boys. 
Rutter offers, as an explanation of the boys’ greater vulnerability to marital stress, the 
notion that males are “immature organisms” in comparison with females. A simpler 
explanation would be that boys are typically not as well socialized as girls are to ex-
press their feelings openly by crying, or confiding in another, and that their only outlet 
would be the angry outbursts that become labeled “antisocial” behavior. Unfor-
unately, most studies do not report a breakdown of results by sex, and this is surely a 
fruitful area for investigation.

Nye (1957) studied child adjustment in broken and unhappy intact homes. Seven 
hundred eighty high school students completed a questionnaire designed to measure 
psychosocial adjustment. Nye structured the instrument like the MMPI in that it in-
cluded nonrelevant items which indicated whether the subject was lying, trying to 
shock the experimenter, or not actually reading the items. On the basis of these 
questions he eliminated 1% of the sample. One sixth of the 780 students came from 
broken homes — reflecting the national average. Nye tested the two groups for 
differences on SES, type of house, nationality, education of parents, and church atten-
dance. None was significant. He found that adolescents in broken homes showed less 
psychosomatic illness, less delinquent behavior, and better adjustment to parents than 
did children in unhappy, unbroken homes. The two groups did not differ with respect 
to school adjustment or the presence of delinquent companions. Despite the fact that 
the author took precautions to prevent lying and falsifying on the test, it is still a self-
report instrument, subject to the distortions of any such instrument.

Raschke and Raschke (1977) studied 289 3rd, 6th and 8th graders, measuring 
self-concept and family type. Using the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale, 
and self-report measures for family structure (e.g., divorced, intact, etc.) and for 
presence of home conflict, no significant differences were found in the self-concept of 
children from intact, single-parent, reconstituted, or other types of families. However, 
the self-concept of children was significantly lower where conflict in the home was 
high, regardless of family type.

Thus, evidence seems to be growing that parental conflict is a greater stressor 
than parental absence for children. This finding aids in the interpretation of results 
reported earlier. Several authors have reported high acting-out behavior in children of 
divorce (e.g., Felner, 1975; Kalter, 1977; Tooley, 1975; Hetherington et al., 1976) and 
some (e.g., Felner et al., 1975; Kalter, 1977) have noted that children who had lost a 
parent through death did not display acting-out behavior. Typically, divorce of 
parents is preceded by domestic turbulence, whereas death of a parent is not. Why 
should parental quarreling be related to children’s acting-out? One explanation is that 
children are modeling the aggression displayed by the parents. Grossman and Burton 
(1978) studied the imitative aggressive behavior of 52 boys ages 4–8 in intact,
divorced, and separated homes. Father-absent boys imitated more aggression after exposure to an aggressive film model than father-present boys. Boys from separated homes imitated more aggression than boys from divorced or father-present homes. This last distinction is revealing. The separation time, before the break is final, might well be the time of greatest parental aggression. Another possibility is that the separation period is when children are first adjusting to the absence of their father, and that their frustration level is highest at this time.

Luepnitz (1979) interviewed 24 college students whose parents had divorced when the subjects (Ss) were children. The majority of Ss reported that the most difficult phase of the process had been the predivorce period when the tension level in the home was highest. A number of Ss had developed a psychosomatic ailment or a behavior problem as a result of the family situation, but the onset of those symptoms was telling. For example, one S who had felt chronically "in the middle of" parental violence developed an ulcer at age 5. She did not become a "child of divorce" until she was 9, however. This illustrates the need to understand the total family history in interpreting children's problems. It seems more appropriate to consider her ulcer a result of the marital stress than of the "broken home."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We may conclude on the basis of the literature reviewed that many children do indeed suffer at the time surrounding parental divorce and that the nature of the distress appears to be age-specific. Data on father absence suggest that the stress on the child of divorce is not primarily in response to the one-parent home, but rather to the turmoil involved in parental conflict. This does not mean that children of divorce do not suffer, or that they should not be considered "a population at risk." On the contrary, divorce is precisely an event which tends to correlate with that stress-inducing parental discord. But the distinction between the causal agents of children's suffering seems to be an important one. Clinicians, social workers, and lawyers can do a service to clients in reminding them that children are very sensitive to parental violence and that continuing the acrimony after divorce, or talking to the children against the other parent, is extremely undesirable. On the other hand, parents can be reassured that the myths about divorce are distorted and that the one-parent home does not "cause" delinquency, homosexuality, neurosis, and school failure. It seems reasonable that the parent who is not overly anxious about the fate of her/his children in a "broken home" will be happier, more relaxed, and less guilty (i.e., a better) parent. The clinician or lawyer might want to alert the client to some responses their child might have to the situation, as reported earlier by Kelly and Wallerstein (1976) and by Westman (1972). A rather ubiquitous comment in the literature is that parents tend to be afraid to talk about the divorce to their children. One study reported that 80% of parents told their children nothing about the divorce (Kelly & Wallerstein, 1977). Young adults whose parents divorced in childhood remembered the painful confusion they felt because no one had bothered to explain to them what was about to happen (Luepnitz, 1979). Another suggestion is made by Bowlby (1973) — that parents need to respect whatever grieving takes place in the child. Eating disturbances and bedwetting should
not be considered "regression" according to Bowlby; rather they are part of a natural, necessary, and temporary response to loss.

It is probably most useful for professionals to think of divorce in terms of crisis theory (Aguilera & Messick, 1974), which postulates that a crisis can lead to higher or lower levels of functioning, depending on the coping strategies deployed by the individual. That is, absence of one parent may be the stimulus for aggression toward the remaining parent, or for increased independence and maturity. The support available to the child will influence the way (s)he copes with the crisis.

Finally, the lawyer or clinician might recommend to appropriate clients, local one-parent organizations such as Parents Without Partners which provide valuable support for thousands of unmarried parents in the nation. Adults who are receiving some kind of emotional support during the divorce transition might be less likely to displace anger toward the spouse onto the children. Therapy is an appropriate place to work through feelings of frustration, anger, and loneliness which accompany divorce. Finally, for parents seeking literature to help them explain the divorce to children, this author recommends Gardner's The Boys and Girls Book About Divorce, which helps children identify and accept their feelings.

Conspicuously absent from this review are studies of the effects of paternal custody on children. This area is virtually untouched by social science. Some suggestions for research, then, are: (1) comparative studies of the effects of maternal, paternal and joint custody; (2) a long-range study of children of divorce and children from unhappy intact homes (couples seeking marital counseling might provide a pool for such a study. Samples could be drawn of families who eventually divorced and those who stayed together); and (3) studies of entire families in order to ascertain what kind of family life exists in America's 20 million divorced homes. How does the daily routine of life change with only one residential parent? How does the support network of the family change? How do sibling relationships change? This research is important since the majority of the studies reviewed here have in common a billiard-ball model of research. That is, one studies the "impact" of one discrete event (e.g., divorce) on another event (e.g., children's school performance). Typically, only the "problem child" has been examined in these studies; occasionally both child and parent are studied. The fact that divorced families have not been studied as families reflects what Herzog and Sudia (1973) have called a tendency to see the one-parent family as an "unfamily," nonfamily, or sick family. Before trying to isolate the effects of sex, age, SES, race, length of marriage, and other discrete forces, it will be necessary to construct a working view of how various types of families function as living systems.

Deborah Anna Luepnitz
Department of Psychology
State University of New York at Buffalo

REFERENCES


