

1992

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Recommended Citation

Wetzel, Donna and Plascak-Craig, Faye D. (1992) "The priming effects of parental divorce on relationship attitudes," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 1 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol1/iss1/11>

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The Priming Effects of Parental Divorce on Relationship Attitudes

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ABSTRACT

Past findings frequently reported that children with divorced parents exhibit negative behaviors at some time following the divorce, however, data have not consistently demonstrated attitudinal effects. In this study, 70 college undergraduates, half with divorced parents and half with intact families, were administered an original survey for recording ratings of relationship attitudes and eight semantic differential scales. Although adult children of divorced parents rated their parents relationships less positively than did those from intact families, there were no differences by parental history in their relationship fears. There were semantic differences in ratings of five constructs (FAMILY, FATHER, MARRIAGE, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP, DIVORCE): Adult children of divorced parents rated evaluation, potency and/or activity dimensions of the first four constructs more negatively than did raters from intact families. DIVORCE was rated more positively on all three semantic dimensions by subjects with divorced parents. Ratings of FAMILY and WORK exhibited a cross-over "parental history X construct" interaction: The divorce history group rated WORK higher than FAMILY; the intact history group rated FAMILY higher than WORK. Ratings of parental relationship correlated positively with ratings of MOTHER and FATHER for intact-family subjects, but parental relationship ratings were unrelated to parent ratings by divorced-parents subjects. It appeared that the experience of parental divorce did produce priming effects on ratings of relationship constructs and work. Awareness of these effects may make assessment and counseling more effective for those with parental divorce histories.

INTRODUCTION

Today, about 60% of American divorces occur in families with at least one child below the age of 18 (Runyon & Jackson, 1987/88). Losing a parent through divorce more negatively affects the psychological development of a child than does losing a parent by death (Rozendal, 1983). Because so many children may be negatively affected by this increasingly common life event, the impact of parental divorce has been more frequently addressed in the recent social sciences literature.

Past research has obtained several correlates and variables related to behavioral and attitudinal changes in children experiencing parental divorce. Different children showed different disturbances at different times and for varied durations. The child's developmental stage, temperament, personality profile, sex, pre-divorce parental relationships, economic status, and support systems have impacted subsequent behaviors following parental break-up (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman & Roberts, 1990; Harbison, 1989; Wallerstein, 1983). Some children displayed their most disruptive behaviors immediately following the divorce, and some children exhibited "remarkable resiliency and in the long term may [have] actually been enhanced by coping with these transitions." (Hetherington, Stanley-Hagen & Anderson, 1989, p. 303) Success in school, an extracurricular activity, or a strong relationship with someone outside the household have helped children adjust to parental divorce (Pines, 1984).

A 15 year study of children (Wallerstein, 1989), ranging in age from 2 to 10 years at the time of divorce, found that 60% reported feeling unimportant to at least one parent after the break-up. The "sleeper effect", late development of behavior problems after parental divorce, was related to a fear of betrayal, particularly for female children, and a psychological syndrome, the "overburdened child," was documented. An overburdened child evidences such things as: taking over household responsibilities becoming the caretaker for one or both parents, as an

emotional outlet, advisor, or taking on the parental role; or becoming completely independent because parents became overly concerned with getting their own lives back on track without thinking of anyone else.

The roles of estrangement from the non-custodial parent and of continued hostilities on subsequent relationship attitudes have not been conclusively established, however, 50% of children with divorced parents stated that their divorced parents continued quarreling (Wallerstein, 1989). Interparental conflict, and not separation, may be the principle cause for an association between divorce and childhood problems (Emery, 1982). Conflict about the reduction in finances has been cited as a major source of stress, acting as a potentiator for negative divorce effects (McLoyd, 1989).

Divorce experiences did not negatively affect general trust but were related to heightened perceptions of relationship risks (Franklin, Janoff-Bulman & Roberts, 1990). Weinstein (1989) reported that persons who experienced "life hazards" spend increased amounts of time thinking about possible similar situations. Childhood divorce experience may function as a "life hazard", increasing the availability of negative information about personal relationships in memory. A social priming effect may result from such heightened negative recall by children with divorced parents, and if recalled information is maladaptive, the priming is detrimental to the development of healthy adult family relationships. Detrimental priming may result in maladaptive attitudes, like marital pessimism. Adults with divorced parents may be negatively affected by social priming about relationships, may develop unusual fears, and may perceive high levels of relationship risk that impact their interpersonal behaviors. This study hypothesizes that adult children of divorced parents will exhibit higher fear of commitment, will be more suspicious of their mates, and will rate semantic dimensions of relationship constructs more negatively than will adult children from intact families, indirectly supporting social priming by the parental divorce experience.

METHOD

Subjects

Thirty-five subjects from intact families (parents married since subject's birth) and 35 subjects with parents who divorced before their twelfth birthdays participated. Data was discarded if either parent was deceased. There were 29 males (12 divorced and 17 intact), and 41 females (23 divorced and 18 intact). Three participants were married, and 67 were single. Ages ranged from 18 to 46 years. Subjects from divorced and from intact families did not differ in college cumulative grade point averages.

Materials

An original survey consisted of (a) demographic information; (b) ratings of relationships (on a five point scale, with "1" representing the most negative rating and a "5" the most positive); and (c) eight relationship constructs (DIVORCE, FAMILY, FATHER, MOTHER, HOLIDAY, MARRIAGE, PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP and WORK). The semantic differential technique (Osgood, Suci & Tannebaum, 1957) was used to measure semantic differences in the eight constructs. Nine sets of bipolar adjectives were selected, with three adjective pairs representing each of the three theoretical semantic dimensions, evaluation (E), potency (P) and activity (A). The bipolar adjective pairs were rated on 7 point scales, with each adjective pair placed as endpoints of the scale. Adjective directionality was varied to avoid response sets.

Procedure

The original survey and semantic differential items were presented to each subject and the order of administration of test materials was randomized. After data collection, all construct ratings were transformed by computer so that a "1" was the most negative rating and a "7" the most positive on each dimension. The three ratings for each of the E, P and A dimensions were averaged to compute E, P and A dependent measures. Transformed data were analyzed by microcomputer.

RESULTS

Analyses of Relationship Ratings.

The 2 X 2 "parental history (PH) X sex" ANOVAs of two dependent measures, ratings of relationship fears and parents' relationships, were performed. There were no main effect or interaction effect differences in relationship fears. Subjects with divorced parents were no more fearful of marriage, did not engage in more interpersonal withdrawal, and did not have greater cheating suspicions than did those subjects from intact families. Only the PH main effect was significant on ratings of parental relationships; the sex and interaction effects were NS. Both males and females with divorced parents (M = 2.0, SD = 1.05) rated their parents' relationship significantly more conflict laden than did males and females from intact families (M = 3.9, SD=1.10).

Analysis of Attitude Constructs

Table 1 presents the significant PH main effects obtained by multiple 2 X 2 (PH X sex) ANOVAs on the ratings of the three dimensions for each of the eight constructs. There were no significant sex or interaction effects on the dependent measures.

FATHER was rated significantly more negatively by the divorced parent history group (DPH) on the evaluative dimension - "unimportant", "bad", and "negative"; more negatively on the potency dimension -- "useless", "weak", and "faded"; and more negatively on the activity dimension -- "stagnant", "inert", and "dull". MOTHER ratings were generally positive (important, good, positive, busy, growing, spirited, effective, strong, and vivid), and did not differ by parental history group. MARRIAGE ratings by subjects from intact families were significantly higher in evaluation -- "beneficial", "positive", and "valuable"; and more potent -- "robust", "effective", and "powerful". MARRIAGE was rated equally active by PH groups.

Unexpectedly, the DPH ratings on DIVORCE were more positive on all three semantic dimensions -- "valuable", "beneficial", "positive", "robust", "effective", "powerful", "growing", and "energetic". Only the potency (not the evaluation or activity) semantic dimension for PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP and for FAMILY were significantly lower for DPH raters.

Overall, subjects with divorced parents perceived personal relationships, family, marriage, and father as less potent constructs than did intact family subjects. The divorced group evaluated divorce more positively, but evaluated father and marriage more negatively, perceiving each as more inactive constructs than did the intact family raters.

Correlations by PH group between survey ratings of parental relationship and construct ratings of MOTHER and FATHER were performed. Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics and the correlations for those construct dimensions exhibiting disparate PH effects.

Table 1

Significant "parental history" main effects obtained on 2 X 2 ANOVAs on attitude constructs

Summary of ANOVA Results					Mean PH group	
	SS	df	MS	F	p	
FATHER						
E	65.60	1	65.60	28.49	.0002	I = 6.31 D = 4.36
P	65.56	1	65.56	35.18	.0001	I = 6.13 D = 4.11
A	35.86	1	35.86	16.70	.0003	I = 5.67 D = 4.12
MARRIAGE						
E	7.91	1	7.91	10.12	.0026	I = 6.43 D = 5.82
P	8.22	1	8.22	8.64	.0047	I = 6.04 D = 5.33
DIVORCE						
E	14.81	1	14.81	7.07	.0096	D = 3.57 I = 2.77
P	9.13	1	9.13	4.95	.0278	D = 4.18 I = 3.47
A	10.16	1	10.16	4.58	.0338	D = 3.86 I = 3.16
PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP						
P	3.84	1	3.84	4.39	.0337	I = 6.05 D = 5.67
FAMILY						
P	5.96	1	5.96	3.98	.0474	I = 5.89 D = 5.29

E = evaluation P = potency A = activity

Table 2

Significant Pearson correlations by PH groups between ratings of parents' relationships and FATHER and MOTHER construct ratings

Intact Family (IPH)			Divorced Family (DPH)		
	FATHER	parents' relationship	FATHER	parents' relationship	
Potency					
M	6.13	3.89	4.11	2.65	
SD	.83	1.10	1.72	1.21	
	r (33) = .34*		r (35) = .16		
Activity					
M	5.67	3.89	4.12	2.65	
SD	1.08	1.10	1.73	1.21	
	r (33) = .39*		r (35) = .33		
MOTHER parents' relationship			MOTHER parents' relationship		
Evaluation					
M	6.49	3.89	6.15	2.65	
SD	.80	1.10	1.26	1.21	
	r (33) = .39*		r (35) = .11		
Potency					
M	5.94	3.89	5.59	2.65	
SD	1.08	1.10	1.22	1.21	
	r (33) = .44**		r (35) = .04		
Activity					
M	5.80	3.89	5.68	2.65	
SD	1.17	1.10	1.33	1.21	
	r (33) = .47**		r (35) = .08		

*p < .04 **p < .005

The ratings of parental relationship conflict by adult offspring of divorced parents were uncorrelated to both FATHER and MOTHER ratings, but ratings of parental relations by subjects from intact families were significantly related to their FATHER and MOTHER ratings.

A 2 X 2 "parental history (PH) X construct" repeated measures ANOVA (Kirk, 1991), with WORK and FAMILY as the repeated measure, was performed on potency (P) ratings.

Subjects with divorced parents rated WORK potency significantly higher than FAMILY potency; subjects from intact families rated FAMILY potency significantly higher than WORK potency.

DISCUSSION

Not surprisingly, raters from divorced families reported more parental conflict than did those from intact families, but, contrary to expectation, the divorced parent history group did not have greater relationship fears than did the intact parent history group. Whatever attitudinal priming

may be evident, experienced parental conflict did not affect fear of marriage, interpersonal withdrawal tendencies or cheating suspicions for the two groups. Perhaps adults do not rely directly on parental relationships in evaluating their own relationship attitudes.

With regard to the five constructs that did demonstrate group semantic differences, it appeared that priming affected how relationship constructs were cognitively processed. Groups did not differ in academic achievement or by sex, age and marital status categories, however, those who had experienced parental divorce before their twelfth birthdays did perceive DIVORCE as more valuable, more potent, and more active than did the intact family group. Perhaps the observation of more negative parent behaviors (e.g., verbal and physical abuse) which diminished after the separation primed more positive associations with this construct. In similar fashion, the potency of PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP, FAMILY, and MARRIAGE may have been reduced by the primed memories of conflict.

MARRIAGE was perceived negatively on evaluative and potency semantic dimensions by offspring of divorce: Priming was even stronger for this construct, possibly because subjects had experienced or witnessed direct confirmatory evidence for their negative marriage associations. Additional investigation for specific cognitive processes linked to evaluation of MARRIAGE is warranted.

The most intriguing finding was that of differences in meaning attached to MOTHER and FATHER. MOTHER did not appear to be associated with negative recall by either group, and ratings of MOTHER and FATHER constructs by adults from intact families were consistent with parent relationship ratings. Intact family subjects from more peaceful homes rated each parent construct more positively. But adults from divorced families perceived FATHER to be low on evaluation, potency, and activity, with no relation to their ratings of parent relationship. DPH subjects did not appear to consider low parent relationship ratings in making judgments on FATHER

and MOTHER constructs. Why this occurred is not clear: it may be that divorced fathers behaved badly toward their children or that divorced mothers overtly or covertly eroded the father-child bond, or both. Further study on the impact of divorce experience on FATHER but not MOTHER constructs is indicated.

The differential effect of parental relationship status on conceptions of FAMILY and WORK potency is also very interesting. Adults who had experienced parental divorce assigned higher ratings to work than to family, compared with adults from intact families. Past experiences with the negative aspects of family relationships may have primed raters to seek positive reinforcement from work activities rather than from family life. The greater perceived potency of work may induce greater investments of time and greater reward outputs which in turn reinforce the DPH raters' work value cognition. The cognitive linkages between past divorce experience and the relative value assigned to family and work may help to explain the development of adult stress and marriage, life and work satisfactions.

The study findings provided evidence of social cognitive priming by parental divorce experience. The priming did not appear to directly affect fears about the raters' personal relationships, but raters' conceptions of relationship constructs were more negative, presumably because of their early experience with parental divorce. FATHER and MARRIAGE appeared to be most negatively affected, and conceptions of FAMILY in contrast to WORK were different for those whose parents had divorced. The awareness that parental divorce history affects semantic processing of relationship constructs might be useful in counseling interactions. The specific mental processes that directly and indirectly affect cognitive meaning and the relation of the processes to past parental experiences remain to be investigated.

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