

COMMUNICATION IN DIVORCED AND SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES

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Communication patterns are a reflection of relationship dynamics, and changes in intra-familial relationships are a central dynamic in the divorce process. Communication per se has not been a primary focus in divorce research, although certain aspects of communication, such as parental conflict, have been intensively studied mostly for their impact on offspring adjustment. In examining the literature with communication as the lens, the yield can be narrow if only those variables that are directly related to expression of communication, such as degree of conflict, quality of affect, and frequency of interaction, are considered. The yield is considerably higher if variables that are more broadly reflective of relationship dynamics are included, as we did for this chapter. Most divorce research has as its aim the elucidation of how parental divorce and its host of related factors affect the adjustment of offspring in the short and, more recently, in the long term. For the purpose of this endeavor, we shift the focus to highlighting changes in communication patterns and relevant relationship dynamics as families go through the divorce process and include the association with outcomes only secondarily.

Defined broadly, communication includes not only verbal, paraverbal, and nonverbal messages exchanged when people are interacting but also the metacommunication over time of themes, attitudes, and values. In families, metacommunication from parents to children involves information imparted from the accumulation of parent-child interactions as they are repeated and evolve over time and information absorbed by children observing and witnessing parental interactions and behavior, again over time. Within the family, metacommunication establishes a shared, internalized sense of family including history, relationships, roles, worldviews, loyalty issues, and orientation to others and to the future

(Laing, 1971). In addition to patterns and styles of direct, interpersonal communication that have been observed or reported between members of divorced families, we also discuss the nature of metamessages, particularly those that may be communicated to offspring as a consequence of divorce.

The predominant method of study in divorce research has been through self-report measures in which one or more family members either fill out paper and pencil questionnaires consisting of rating scales and symptom checklists or respond to highly structured scaled items during a short face-to-face or telephone interview. This method is especially useful in large-scale demographic research (Booth, Johnson, White, & Edwards, 1991; Chase-Lansdale, Cherlin, & Kiernan, 1995; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983). The use of observational methodology in which family members interact together so that the communication between them can be directly observed is rare. Hetherington's early work (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979, 1982) and more recent research by Gottman and associates (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Katz & Gottman, 1993) are exceptional instances. Our own method utilizes individual, face-to-face, semistructured clinical interviews with all available family members. Often lasting for hours, these interviews are conducted by highly trained professionals who encourage the participants to explain in detail their feelings, perceptions, attitudes, behaviors, and expectations about targeted areas of their lives (Lewis & Wallerstein, 1987; Wallerstein, Corbin, & Lewis, 1988). These different methodologies result in very different ways of operationalizing and measuring dimensions of human behavior, such as marital conflict. Although being labeled similar names, such as conflict or discord, the actual slices of human behavior each study includes in its designation are often quite dissimilar. Mitigating this apparent confusion is the fact that results from all longitudinal studies of divorce over 10 years show a remarkable convergence in their main findings despite different sample sizes and different approaches to studying the same, critical arenas of divorce-related behavior. In this chapter, we focus on the commonalities in the findings across studies and highlight the different methodologies as they inform and illuminate the discussion.

PREDIVORCE COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS

Recent investigation has included a focus on family characteristics that existed prior to divorce, sometimes shown to have predated the divorce by many years. Although it is common sense to assume that there were problems in a marriage prior to the decision to divorce, and that these problems were likely causal in bringing about the divorce, these recent reports have helped elucidate differences in family patterns and the nature of interactions between families who have problems but who continue to stay intact versus families who split up. This line of investigation has also led to intriguing insights regarding the relative influence of family process (communication style) and family structure (divorce) on long-term offspring attitudes and behavior in commitment and marriage.

Frequency of marital conflict has been the most intensively studied process variable in divorce research and has been the main focus of investigations into predivorce family characteristics. Prospective longitudinal studies have found higher levels of marital discord reported in families who later divorced as long as 12 years prior to the decision to separate

(Amato, Loomis, & Booth, 1995; Cherlin et al., 1991; Furstenberg & Teitler, 1994). The presence of high amounts of negative affect, including criticism, defensiveness, contempt and “stonewalling,” a form of withdrawal, predicted couples who were more likely to divorce within the first 7 years, whereas it was the absence of more positive affect that was the best predictor of later divorces (Gottman & Levenson, 2000).

Poorer and more dysfunctional patterns of parenting have been associated with higher levels of marital discord along with a decrease in quality of parent–child relationships. These factors have been repeatedly shown to affect children’s adjustment (Amato & Booth, 1996; Block, Block, & Gjerde, 1986; Cherlin et al., 1991; Emery, 1982). For example, parents in families that later divorced showed more rejection and less involvement with their sons (Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993). In their research on processes linking marital interaction and its impact on child behavior, Gottman and Katz (Gottman & Katz, 1989; Katz & Gottman, 1993) found maritally distressed couples to show parenting styles which were associated with anger and noncompliance in their children, that were cold, unresponsive, angry, and low in limit setting and structuring. Furthermore, different patterns of marital discord were predictive of different types of child behavior as mutual spousal hostility was predictive of some forms of externalizing behavior, whereas marital strategies containing anger and distancing tended to produce offspring with internalizing problems.

Conflict that directly involves the children is universally regarded as most harmful to children’s well-being and is the most detrimental to parent–child relationships (Amato, 1986; Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). This includes involving children in physical violence or directly exposing children to parental violence, fighting about the children, and making the child a player, such as enlisting them in loyalty conflicts or bitter alliances or as conduits of negative communication (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1992; Davies & Cummings, 1994; Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin, Dornbusch, 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). A critical distinction may be drawn between those families in which parental conflict is kept within boundaries that protect the children from witnessing, being the focus of, or being involved with the conflict as participants. In some families parents are unhappy and discordant but manage to keep a firm boundary between their marital difficulties and exposing the children in any way to these problems. Both parents have the psychological capability to control and direct their negative feelings to venues away from the children as well as the mutual motivation to keep their parenting functioning well. Their children have a dim sense that conflict happens behind closed doors, but their functioning is not compromised (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). An intermediate atmosphere exists when children are not directly involved, but marital conflict takes its toll in diminished parenting as parents are more irritable and have less energy and motivation to support and monitor their children’s activities (Hetherington, Bridges, & Isabella, 1998).

A critical question currently being discussed is whether children in families where there is toxic conflict that chronically and directly involves the children are better off if their parents divorce. There is little argument that marital conflict and poorer parenting lead to difficulties for children regardless of whether the family later divorces (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). In fact, in a survey of research done throughout the 1980s, children from high-conflict families where the parents did not divorce showed the most adjustment problems followed by children from divorced families (Amato & Keith, 1991a, 1991b). In

his meta-analysis of studies done in the 1990s Amato again found relatively better long-term outcomes in offspring from families with chronic, intense, high levels of conflict when the parents did divorce as compared to those who remained in nondivorced chronically high-conflict families (Amato, 2001).

Various explanations and challenges have been raised regarding this issue. Amato, Booth, and colleagues have hypothesized that divorce removes children from highly stressful and destructive family relationships, and the assumed less stressful postdivorce environment mitigates other divorce-related losses such as decline in living standards and less frequent parental contact (Amato et al., 1995). They speculate that having lived through and then escaping a high conflict, difficult family confers a type of resiliency on the offspring, which then helps them in adult relationships (Booth, 1999).

An unaddressed issue that is difficult to research concerns the nature of the high levels of conflict in families who later divorce and in those who remain married. Do families that later divorce have the highest levels and the most destructive types of conflict? Alternatively, do high-conflict families who stay married develop even more toxic destructive cycles of interaction that involve the children? Our own recent research confirms that highly dysfunctional marriages containing violence and involvement of the children in all sorts of unhealthy interactions not only endure over the long term but also can be mutually satisfying to both adults. The only distinguishing feature from these and our group of high-conflict families who divorced was that one of the adults became unhappy and disillusioned and eventually found a way to get out (Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Central to the argument that divorce leads to a decrease in stress for offspring from high-conflict families is the assumption that conflict declines after divorce. In fact, the overwhelming evidence points to the contrary—that conflict is exacerbated by the demands and circumstances of divorce, particularly in the months and years immediately following separation (Hetherington, 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Enduring high levels of acrimony and bitterness was found in over half of our sample of divorced parents 10 years later (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). A related assumption is that unhealthy, abusive patterns of behavior between spouses and between parents and children will be stopped by divorce. Although less extensively studied, the existing evidence points to a more pessimistic outcome in which patterns of dysfunction and abuse continue despite the divorce, both between former spouses and in new, postdivorce relationships and remarriages (Fitzgerald, 1986; Nelson, 1989; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Thus far, we have been considering the impact of high levels of marital conflict on family functioning and its role in the divorce process. But not all families who later divorce can be characterized as high conflict. In our sample, less than 30% reported high, chronic levels of conflict in the predivorce years. Although large-scale survey studies found more predivorce conflict in parents who later divorced, recent statistics indicate that higher levels of enduring conflict do not precede the majority of more recent divorces (Amato, 2001).

There is some evidence that outcomes for offspring in the long term are more compromised when parents divorce following a relatively low-conflict marriage (Amato et al., 1995; Booth, 1999). One of the explanations offered is in low-conflict marriages the children do not anticipate divorce because there have been no overt warning signs, such as open discord. The actuality of the divorce is an unwelcome shock with no preparation. Because the offspring have not been negatively impacted or stressed by ongoing conflict

and involvement in dysfunctional interactions, the changes in the postdivorce environment cause a net increase in stress with no positive consequences. The distress of the children in such families may be further exacerbated because of the well-documented rise in conflict around the time of parental separation. This conflict not only may be a new and unwelcome style of parental interaction but also may be the type of conflict regarding custody, child support, visitation, and time sharing—all issues that are likely to involve the children (Booth & Amato, 2001).

Low levels of conflict should not be equated with low levels of marital problems. Conflict is an easily observed, measured, and recordable aspect of communication and certainly is a signal for distress and unhappiness in a relationship. But the presence of conflict is not the only marker of trouble in marriage. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, there are forces outside the immediate structure of a marriage that can drastically affect its functioning and course. In our sample, events such as the loss of employment, the death of a parent, the influence of cultural and political movements, and the birth of a child had profound psychological effects on a spouse, which then altered the marital dynamics and precipitated divorce. Other marriages absorbed similar events and remained intact. Some marriages characterized by low levels of overt conflict functioned well enough until an extramarital affair caused disruption.

A commonality between high-conflict marriages that dissolve and apparent low-conflict marriages that end in divorce may be a deficiency in relationship skills and dynamics. One or both spouses has trouble psychologically as well as with communicating, getting their own needs recognized and met, and being able to empathize with and satisfy the needs of the other. This is not a new concept and there are many studies, both recent and over the years, that shed light on the nature of these deficiencies. The underlying assumption is that people who later divorce have psychological attributes that are manifested in communication that are dysfunctional to maintaining interpersonal relationships. Some of these styles of communication result in escalating conflict. These include difficulty in solving problems constructively, in controlling anger and resolving tension along with the tendency to respond to criticism defensively, in being overtly critical, in expressing more negative and less positive emotion, and in experiencing more feelings of moodiness and jealousy. Some interactional styles are dysfunctional in that they culminate in withdrawal and involve suppressing not only conflict but also any constructive exchange of feelings and ideas. People with these characteristics tend to be less articulate and clear in their verbal communication, self-disclose less frequently, avoid or withdraw from conflict and problem solving, maintain stable, negative attributions regarding their spouses' behavior while having difficulty taking in their spouses' communication, and utilize contempt, denial, and withdrawal (Bradbury & Fincham, 1990; Fincham, Bradbury, & Scott, 1990; Gottman, 1993, 1994; Leonard & Roberts, 1998; Matthews, Wickrama, & Conger, 1996; Olsen, 1990). In studies on marital satisfaction over time, levels of disagreement and exchange of anger, commonly viewed as markers of marital discord and dissatisfaction, did not predict long-term deterioration or divorce in families where the marriage had lasted longer than 7 years. Other communication characteristics including defensiveness, stubbornness, and withdrawal as well as the absence of positive valence in affect were better predictors (Gottman, 1993; Gottman & Krokoff, 1989). Communication characteristics highly predictive of marital failure seen even early on in newlyweds as well as in more established couples with young children are indicative of underlying cognitive deficits

and learned patterns of perceiving and reacting to others. These deficits and patterns set the stage for nonconstructive communication and in effect predispose the relationship to more negative, less rewarding interaction (Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Carrere, Buehlman, Gottman, Coan, & Ruckstuhl, 2000).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PREDIVORCE AND POSTDIVORCE PATTERNS OF INTERACTION

Divorce profoundly alters not only the structure of the family but also the essential nature of family interactions and relationships. Early on, divorce researchers found little correlation between pre- and postdivorce behavior in families. Fathers who had previously been distant became more engaged and connected, whereas very involved fathers drifted away following divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Mothers radically altered the nature of their caregiving, and children experienced dramatic and unsettling changes in household routine and management, which could not be predicted by predivorce patterns of parenting (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1979). Adults who were apparently stable and mature in their marriages experienced wildly fluctuating emotions and displayed chaotic and risky behaviors after the marriage ended, and some who had been fragile and insecure showed unexpected strength and fortitude after their divorce (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989).

Although conflict is widely regarded as a harbinger of divorce, recent findings show that predivorce conflict is not a good predictor of postdivorce conflict (Booth & Amato, 2001). Conflict increases after divorce in most families regardless of how much or little conflict was present before. In some families conflict remains high for years, even decades following divorce; in others conflict subsides after the initial period of adjustment.

In contrast, one of the most stable characteristics measured is style of communication between spouses. Partners' communication style has been shown to be consistent over type of interaction (situations involving high vs. low conflict during marriage) and, by inference, across pre- and postdivorce years (Gottman & Levenson, 1999.) The manner in which spouses communicate, including the dysfunctional patterns that promoted dissatisfaction and divorce within the marriage, continues into the postdivorce years. There is no indication that physical separation and the legal event of divorce have power, in themselves, to change deeply ingrained patterns of human behavior. The stress of divorce can exacerbate these modes of interaction so that couples whose marriages were typified by high negativity, much strife, and high involvement would only continue this style as they struggle to confront contentious postdivorce issues. Conversely, couples that tended to avoid conflict and meaningful ongoing engagement in their marriages are forced to engage, with little background or skill, in constructive problem solving after they divorce.

There is general agreement that higher postdivorce parental conflict has negative consequences for children and may be one of the most influential factors affecting children's adjustment, especially in the short term (Amato et al., 1995; Guidabaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986; Johnston et al., 1989; Linker, Stolberg, & Green, 1999; Shaw et al., 1993). Research delving into nature or type of conflict suggests that postdivorce conflict is more likely to involve the children and to be enacted in the children's presence as much parental contact revolves around child-related issues such as time-sharing and child

support. In addition to higher conflict, postdivorce communication styles reflect those reported in families before the divorce. These involve more controlling and demands, more expression of negative affect, less expression of positive emotion, and difficulties in solving problems constructively (Amato & Keith, 1991a; Hetherington et al., 1998; Simons, 1996). Suggesting again that it is the more subtle concomitants related to conflict rather than just conflict in general that make the most difference to offspring, a few studies have shown that factors such as conflict resolution style and degree of cooperation (Camara & Resnick, 1988) and interparent hostility (Linker et al., 1999) are more influential in children's postdivorce adjustment.

COMMUNICATION STYLES BETWEEN FORMER SPOUSES AFTER DIVORCE

Research on what happens to the level of communication between ex-spouses indicates that most couples do not discontinue interacting following finalization of the divorce, but that over time the level of intensity and intimacy in interactions subsides. The most significant decline was present in nonparental couples, where for many contact eventually almost entirely disappears (Metts & Cupach, 1995). In addition to frequency, the content of communication also shifts as time passes after divorce. Topics of communication became less personal and less focused on past and present relationship issues. If communication persists at all it tends to revolve around "safe" areas of mutual concern, such as children (if any) or family or "new experiences" (Metts & Cupach, 1995).

A variety of different patterns of communication have been described between ex-spouses following divorce. "Mutual constructive communication" (Christensen & Shank, 1991) and "cooperative colleagues" (Emery, 1994) is generally designated as the healthiest, most functional postdivorce interactive pattern that is relatively impersonal and involves constructive problem solving and avoidance of conflict. "Demand/withdraw communication" (Christensen & Shank, 1991) and "the pursuer and the pursued" (Emery, 1994) involves a pattern where one partner pursues more closeness and contact, although this may take the form of demands and criticism, while the other partner desires more distance and responds by withdrawing and avoiding. Wives typically have been shown to be the "demanders"; and husbands, the "withdrawers," although recent studies, which include nonconflict interactions that precede these patterns, implicate both spouses (Gottman & Levenson, 1999). A third communication style, referred to as "mutual avoidance" (Christensen & Shank, 1991) and "dissolved duos" (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987), is typified by both partners avoiding communicating as much as possible or altogether. Another style characterized by positive interactions is "Perfect Pals" (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987), although the greater level of intimacy it entails may border on enmeshment (Emery, 1994). "Angry Associates" and "Fiery Foes" are different variations of postdivorce relationships that utilize negative communication styles (Ahrons & Rodgers, 1987).

"Distressed" couples seeking counseling for marital problems showed the same types and levels of poorer communicational styles as divorced couples, both being significantly more avoidant and engaging in more demand/withdraw communication (Christensen & Shank, 1991). Communication styles containing more negative affect, hostility, and angry withdrawing characterized marital interactions in couples who were more likely to later divorce (Gottman, 1993).

COMMUNICATION AND POSTDIVORCE PARENTING

“Partners who are also parents can never fully divorce” (Emery, 1994). Because parental responsibilities of former spouses do not end, they must instead undergo transformations and adaptations in an attempt to accommodate to their new roles as parents to their mutual children in their respective postdivorce family contexts. It is expected that separated and divorced parents must be willing to interact, communicate, and cooperate with each other regarding child-related issues despite any feelings of rejection, remorse, bitterness, or anger that they may harbor. Optimally, this mode of cooperative communication should be sustained, at least until the children enter adulthood (Metts & Cupach, 1995). Unfortunately, the majority of former spouses never attain the cooperative level of communication needed to maintain effective mutual parenting. Instead, the majority engage in “parallel” parenting where their relationship is disengaged with little or no communication or cooperation between them. A substantial minority maintain highly conflictual relationships in which the children are often actively involved (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Maccoby et al., 1993; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Parenting is harder after divorce. The often unexpected and overwhelming demands in postdivorce life for single parents temporarily and sometimes permanently derail their energy and ability to parent effectively. Increased external demands, increased stress, the loss of resources, the addition of other adults and responsibilities all take their toll on time, energy, motivation, and emotional availability. For example, at 1 year postdivorce custodial mothers showed less affection, communicated less often, punished more harshly, and showed more inconsistent discipline (Hetherington et al., 1982). Custodial fathers had fewer problems with discipline and control, but they also communicated less, self-disclosed less, and monitored their children’s activities less competently (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). Noncustodial fathers became less parental and authoritative and they interacted in a more peer-related manner with their children (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999).

In addition to these increased pressures on single parenting, newly divorced single parents face the enormously complex task of learning to be a co-parent with their ex-spouse. Co-parenting is a qualitatively different form of parenting and one for which few have any experience or skills. Over the years there has been a growing body of knowledge regarding the set of skills and interactive styles that facilitate optimal co-parenting. Co-parents should work together to avoid conflict, share resources, and respect and support each other’s parenting. Both parents should maintain authoritative parenting styles in which there is warmth, support, effective monitoring of activities, firm, consistent discipline and control, positive discussion, and responsiveness to children’s growing needs and development. Furthermore, co-parents need to communicate often and effectively so that rules, discipline, and parenting styles remain consistent in the two households. The ideal co-parenting arrangement results in the parents maintaining the same level of mutual investment and involvement in parenting their children as they did predivorce and children experiencing the same framework of dual parental focus (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987; Emery, 1994; Hetherington et al., 1982; Maccoby et al., 1993; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

The ability of divorced parents to co-parent together, to communicate about their children, to cooperate to set limits, to problem solve effectively, and to provide consistent, positive affective messages has been shown to be one of the strongest influences on how well children adjust after divorce (Emery, 1982; Linker et al., 1999; Nelson, 1989). Underlying these skills is the basic task of redefining boundaries and roles in order to separate the former spousal relationship from the new co-parent relationship (Emery, 1994). This renegotiation of relationship dynamics is critical in order for divorced parents to give up or encapsulate old patterns of communication and behavior associated with the marital relationship and move on to create new methods of communication that facilitate co-parenting. Maintaining old roles and patterns of communication in the more ambiguous, acrimonious and stressful post divorce environment serves to exacerbate dysfunctional interactions so that conflict escalates or the likelihood of distancing and withdrawal increases (Serovich, Price, Chapman, & Wright, 1982).

The endurance of conflict and hostility is not only detrimental to the children but its presence in the post divorce family serves to block and break down the communication necessary for co-parenting activities (Linker et al., 1999). For many divorced parents the greater access to children as is present in many time-sharing arrangements promotes more frequent parental contact, which then leads to higher levels of hostile communication including open conflict (Nelson, 1989). The presence of ongoing hostility and conflict can ultimately result in less contact as parents, particularly noncustodial fathers, are driven away (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Healy, Malley, & Stewart, 1990; Seltzer, 1991). There is some evidence that custodial mothers control access between fathers and children through the degree of hostility and resentment directed at father, who avoids contact and involvement when negativity is high (Ahrons, 1983; Seltzer & Brandreth, 1994). Frequent and ongoing contact with both parents is promoted as beneficial to children; however, more detailed research indicates contact in the context of high conflict is more detrimental to children's well-being, especially if the conflict occurs in their presence (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Johnston et al., 1989).

Although families who maintain actively high hostility and high conflict are most visible and take up a huge share of professional attention, again, they do not characterize how most divorced parents interact. Over time, the majority settle into patterns of "parallel parenting" where they operate as independent parents, consulting and communicating with the other parent as infrequently as possible, if at all (Furstenberg, 1988). This mode keeps the level of active conflict down but creates two distinct family worlds that may have very different rules, norms, and values for the children to shuttle between (Johnson, 1988). The adjustment to living in parallel worlds that often have little relationship to each other and no access between them compromises psychological development and often imposes economic hardship (Furstenberg, 1990; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

This compromised capacity to parent is thrown into bold relief as children grow into adolescence where the natural volatility and need for monitoring and compassionate limit setting tax the resources of even the most competent parents. Communication quality and the level of constructive communication have been repeatedly shown to be poorest in divorced families of adolescents. Although all parents disengage some as children move into adolescence, communication patterns in families of divorce show higher levels of

disengagement in both parents and adolescents, less and less effective parental monitoring, less parental involvement, and high negativity and conflict, particularly between mothers and daughters (Hetherington, 1993). More adolescents from divorced families leave home or spend little time at home, avoid communication and interaction with family members, and are more likely to be involved in high-risk behaviors such as early sex, alcohol, and drugs (Hetherington, 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Postdivorce Parent–Child Relationships

Divorce usually results in less contact between children and their noncustodial parent (Amato et al., 1995; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985), although in some cases contact with the nonresidential parent becomes closer following divorce (Hetherington et al., 1982; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Both the quantity and the quality of noncustodial father–child relationship decrease over time (Amato & Booth, 1996). Noncustodial fathers maintain more contact and more involvement when conflict and hostility are low with their ex-wives and when they are actively involved in decision making regarding their children (Braver, Wolchik, Sandler, Sheets, Fogas, & Bay, 1993; Cosbie-Burnett & Ahrons, 1985; Seltzer, 1990). Fathers have been more likely to maintain involvement with their sons following divorce (Zill & Rogers, 1988), and father–son involvement has been found to be especially important in the development of sons (Amato & Keith, 1991a).

Divorce results in a lowering of the quality of the child's relationship with the mother as well as with the father (Amato & Keith, 1991a). Although fathers find it hardest to maintain relationships with their daughters in terms of frequency of contact, more overt strain and difficulty have been noted in postdivorce mother–son relationships (Booth & Amato, 1994). In the years immediately following divorce, boys did least well in single-mother households than in other family structures including high-conflict intact families. Girls did as well in mother-headed households when conflict was low as in low-conflict intact families (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999). Girls in mother-headed households often took on the role of helpmate and confidant to their overburdened mothers, which aided in their adjustment in the short-term but, if maintained, negatively affected their adult relationships with men (Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Difficulties persist in parent–child relationships as children from divorced families grow into adulthood. Research suggests that the relationship with the less involved, noncustodial parent was particularly compromised. Earlier feelings of loyalty and yearning for more involvement and contact evolved into counterrejection, lack of respect, and feelings of contempt and pity when children reached adulthood (Wallerstein et al., 2000). Custodial parents who had sacrificed and worked hard to maintain the household during difficult postdivorce years earned respect and admiration, although their adult children felt less closeness and warmth than those for the same parent in nondivorced families. Particularly notable were differences in father–adult son relationships in divorced versus relatively harmonious intact families. We saw a marked increase in closeness and camaraderie as sons grew up and fathers had more time in nondivorced families, whereas sons increased their negative feelings and attributions for their divorced fathers and emotionally disengaged as they grew into adulthood (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000).

Adult children are less likely to spend time with and, importantly as parents become older, less willing to offer financial assistance and feel less responsible for arranging care for their divorced parents, especially for those parents who had been inconsistent, uninvolved, and peripheral in their children's lives (Amato & Booth, 1996). On a more positive note, we found a resurgence in contact and positive communication in some families as the children of divorced parents had their own children. Even parents who had been distant and uninvolved as well as those who had kept in closer contact were drawn in to more rewarding interactions and renewed relationships with their children after they became grandparents (Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Transmission Over Time: Metamessages in Divorced Families

What is the long-term impact of growing up within the communicational and relational context of a divorced family? What dynamics have been shown to be important influences in adult offspring adjustment? What has been transmitted through the years and how does it show up in how adult children conduct their lives and relationships? Both adults from divorced families and adults from conflicted but intact families report more problems in relationships including marriage and show poorer communication skills in dating and in marital interactions (Amato & DeBoer, 2001; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

From their participant–observer perch through countless interactions with and between their parents, it is no surprise that children absorb and then display communicational styles similar to those of their parents. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that adult offspring from both divorced and married but discordant parents showed dysfunctional interactional styles that were negatively affecting the offspring's relationships including their marriages. The content of these interpersonal difficulties sounds very similar to that reported in the marital interactions of the parents: difficulty controlling anger, engagement in more negative, escalating exchanges, more belligerence, criticism and contempt, more denial, and less problem-solving ability (Amato, 1996; Hetherington, 1988; Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Although adults from discordant parental marriages showed similar levels and styles of interactive difficulties as adults from divorced families, these relational difficulties did not lead to higher levels of divorce in their marriages. Although reporting that they had thoughts about divorce, adults from discordant but intact parental marriages were more likely to stay in their marriages, much as their parents had remained in their own troubled marriages (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Only adults from divorced families showed higher levels of divorce in their own marriages. This higher risk for divorce was present whether or not their parents had high-conflict marriages prior to divorcing (Amato & DeBoer, 2001). Over and above interpersonal interactive problems, what is it that children from divorced families bring to marriage that causes them to leave rather than stay?

Amato and DeBoer (2001) speculate that the additional element is that children of divorce actually experience divorce—they have witnessed and lived through not only their parents' marital difficulties but also one (or both) parents' voluntary decision to end the marriage, the wrenching and highly painful process of separation, and the years of postdivorce readjustment. This actual life experience communicates to children from divorced families a different view of marriage—that difficulties should not be endured

and relationship problems are not worked out. Our own intensive interviews with adult children 25 years after their parents' divorce enable us to derive a fuller picture of the metamessages communicated from observing and living through parental divorce.

Experiencing parental separation and the dissolution of the family leaves an indelible impression. Years later adults who were old enough to remember had clear and vivid memories of scenes and images that happened at the time that their parents separated. It is clear that the divorce experience is traumatic for most children and that traumatic events make a profound and lasting psychological and physiological impression. Many children of divorce spend years reacting to this experience—longing for the family to be together, wondering how life would have been different, wishing for more contact and involvement with one or both parents. We found little or no indication that children of divorce have a positive or even a casual attitude toward divorce. Their firsthand experience resulted in a great desire not to repeat what happened to their parents together with an underlying fear that relationships were not to be trusted.

It was striking what was and was not communicated about why parents divorced. At most, the great majority of children received a terse description largely involving who was moving where shortly before the parents separated. In the face of parental pain and reluctance to dredge up traumatic feelings, few children were able to engage in a meaningful dialog with their parents regarding what happened to the parents' marriage and why it failed as the children were growing up. Most were left with explanations largely of their own construction—that their parents had been simply unsuited to one another, that they never should have married in the first place, that one parent had betrayed the other, that their parents had fallen out of love. These children grew into adulthood with no real understanding of what went wrong and certainly with no grasp of the depth and complexity of how two people in a marriage can come to the point of divorce. This lack of a meaningful understanding of marital dynamics that can lead to divorce together with the little they had been told and what they had witnessed left the adult children with a great deal of anxiety regarding relationships. It was hard to trust that love and promises and happiness would really last. Their parents' experience showed otherwise, and they lacked an internal roadmap of how to avoid it happening in their own relationships.

Children of divorce also lacked firsthand experience of how to make a marriage work. They had internalized relational dynamics and methods of communication from their parents that were not facilitative in maintaining a satisfying long-term relationship. They had not developed attitudes, skills, reactions, and expectations that would help them create a successful marriage. Most, having lived through their parents' unsuccessful marriage and divorce as well as subsequent parental relationships and remarriages, had never witnessed two people interacting in a satisfying, lasting relationship.

Tension and conflict were particularly problematic as metamessages that had been absorbed from their families of origin linked relational difficulties with traumatic images of separation and divorce. As adults in their own marriages, they emotionally equated normal stresses inherent in any relationship with the wrenching difficulties, such as betrayal and abandonment, associated with a relationship in trouble and ultimately ending. What had never been communicated was the sense of difficulties being worked through, the expectation that relationships went through high and low periods, and the idea that constructive resolution of conflict and tension could lead to greater intimacy.

What was communicated to children growing up in divorced families were images and skills about how to make it on their own. From watching single parents manage jobs, households, children, and relationships, and from their own experience either living with a single parent who had limited time and availability or living between two parallel parental households, they acquired characteristics that they were proud of as adults. They learned that it was possible to work through difficulty and hardship alone. They learned the value of working hard and what it takes to run a household. They learned self-reliance, independence, and to make their own judgments and decisions. Many learned to be good negotiators and mediators from years of balancing and going between their divorced parents—skills that served them well in the workplace but that were not particularly useful in their own relationships. Although most wished to share their lives with a partner, unlike adults from ever married families, adults from divorced parents had actual life experience being divorced and living in a postdivorce family. All of these metamessages made divorce more painful but more probable for children of divorced families.

CONCLUSIONS

The state of the research on communication in divorced and single-parent families presents a complex and provocative picture. Most research has been conducted using self-report measures on a small number of process variables; a smaller number of studies have conducted more in-depth clinical examination across a wider arena of intrafamilial variables, and only a few investigations have directly observed family members interacting together. The same label, such as marital conflict, has been used to describe very different slices of human experience depending on the method of investigation employed. Marital conflict, as rated on a 5-point scale by one of the marriage partners in a short, anonymous telephone interview is probably a different variable from marital conflict assessed by a trained clinician after intensively interviewing both spouses individually, and both of these are different phenomena from the marital conflict observed as marital partners interact together discussing a stressful situation. The time frame of divorce research also spans across an impressive range. A handful of studies have data spanning over 20 years; most examine divorce in the months to 2 or 3 years following parental separation; and a very few prospectively predict divorce from interactions in the first months of a new marriage or even before marriage. Yet, in the past few years, longitudinal studies have reported long-term findings, and there have been meta-analyses integrating decades of individual studies, both of which have contributed to a consolidation and convergence of findings and a clearer perspective on what happens when families divorce.

Nonfacilitative and disruptive communication patterns between spouses have been repeatedly noted both before and after divorce and in marriages that endured but were troubled. These have been linked to less adequate parental behavior, which in turn results in poorer outcomes in offspring. There is evidence to suggest that these maladaptive parental patterns are learned by offspring who then exhibit them in their own adult intimate relationships that are also seen as more troubled. When spouses divorce, additional metamessages about handling stress and conflict, about leaving rather than staying, about surviving after separation, and about forming new relationships after divorce are also communicated to offspring, who then incorporate them into their own tendency to divorce. It

seems clear that certain critical points in family life need further, more intensive study and intervention, as they are pivotal in whether communication patterns that are more likely to lead to divorce are maintained and passed on. One point for more study and intervention is in late adolescence and early adulthood as patterns learned from the family of origin begin to emerge in intimate relationships. Related time periods are just before and after marriage when communication systems and patterns begin to be consolidated between the committed couple. Another critical period is at the time of divorce when the stress of divorce exacerbates existing problems and creates new ones. The enormous task of learning new ways to effectively co-parent after divorce, which clearly contributes to better outcomes for the children, is a third arena where more understanding of the processes that derail and facilitate co-parenting would then lead to the development of more informed policies and more focused, effective intervention.

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