

Longevity following the experience of parental divorce

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Abstract

An archival prospective design was used to study mediating and moderating variables for the association between parental divorce and increased mortality risk, using a sub-group ($n = 1183$) of individuals from the US Terman Life Cycle Study covering the period 1921–2000. In childhood, both socioeconomic status (SES) and family psychosocial environment were related to parental divorce but did little to explain its effects. The higher mortality risk associated with experiencing parental divorce was ameliorated among individuals (especially men) who achieved a sense of personal satisfaction by mid-life. Behaviorally, smoking was the strongest mediator of the divorce-mortality link. This study extends previous work on the long-term effects of parental divorce and reveals some reasons why the stress of parental divorce in childhood need not necessarily lead to negative later-life outcomes.

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Introduction

Unstable families and disruptive home environments can be damaging to children, both at the time they occur, and years into the future. Repetti, Taylor, and Seeman (2002) summarize a large body of work indicating that children in “risky families”, those characterized by conflict, aggression and lack of nurturance, are vulnerable to a host of physical and mental health problems. Regarding physical health, researchers have found that abuse in childhood (Walker et al., 1999); family conflict and aggression (Lundberg, 1993; Mechanic & Hansell, 1989; Montgomery, Bartley, & Wilkinson, 1997); and neglect (Wickrama, Lorenz, & Conger, 1997; Gottman & Katz, 1989; Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Shaw, Kraus, Chatters, Connell, &

Ingersoll-Dayton, 2004) are all predictive of poor outcomes.

The negative effects on psychological and physical health associated with the particular stress of the divorce of one’s parents during childhood are well documented (Amato, 2001; Amato & Keith, 1991a, b; Cherlin et al., 1991; Emery, 1999; Frustenberg & Teitler, 1994; Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Tucker et al., 1997; Wallerstein, 1991). Our own work using prospective archival data found a striking effect of parental divorce on mortality risk across decades of life: on average, children from divorced families died 4 years earlier compared to their peers from non-divorced households (Schwartz et al., 1995). That study also found that parental divorce was the primary early life social predictor of life-span mortality risk and appeared independent of childhood personality. The present paper follows up on that finding.

It is not the case, however, that all children of parental divorce suffer the same increases in risk. Many

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participants who experienced parental divorce in the Schwartz et al. (1995) study did not die earlier than average, suggesting that these individuals mitigated their risk and did not embark on a path to increased vulnerability. In much the same way that Repetti et al. (2002) propose that a combination of environmental risk factors and their physiological correlates will sometimes lead to deleterious health outcomes, a combination of mediating and/or moderating factors may allow certain individuals to withstand or even flourish in the face of a traumatic event such as parental divorce. At the psychophysiological level, there is variability in the degree to which exposure to stress creates dysregulation in responses of the sympathetic-adrenomedullary system, the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenocortical axis, and the serotonergic system (Repetti et al., 2002; Kaufman et al., 1998; Koob, Sanna, & Bloom, 1998; Rosen & Schulkin, 1998). Similarly, at the socio-behavioral level, there is variability in the extent to which early stresses lead to health-impairing behaviors, whether they be detrimental coping strategies (such as substance abuse) or lowered levels of achievement leading to further stressors (e.g., economic difficulties after dropping out of school) (Frustenberg & Teitler, 1994; Repetti et al., 2002; Tucker et al., 1997).

The present study thus addresses the question of which life pathways lead to health and well-being versus psychological maladjustment and premature mortality, in the face of parental divorce. On the one hand, a diathesis-stress model would predict that parental divorce, in combination with other risk factors, may initiate or prime a developmental process whose eventual outcome is premature death. Conversely, the stress of parental divorce combined with salutary variables may produce a strengthening experience (Park, 1998), consequently reducing the health risks. For example, coping with parental divorce may provide children with opportunities for the development of skills, mastery, and personal relationships that promote thriving (e.g., Carver, 1998; Ickovics & Park, 1998). A number of such mediating and moderating variables are suggested by past research, including family variables, socioeconomic variables, personal and behavioral variables, and social variables.

Family environment

Interparental conflict and poor parenting skills consistently appear as negative correlates of psychological well-being for children from broken homes (Emery & Forehand, 1994; Shaw & Emery, 1987; Shaw, Emery, & Tuer, 1993). Block, Block, and Gjerde (1988) reported that prior to the actual divorce, fathers in their study tended to disengage from their relationships with their children and mothers often acted resentful toward their children.

After divorce, changes in contact with the non-custodial parent represent a significant challenge for most children (Emery & Forehand, 1994), but a strong, positive relationship with one competent parent seems to buffer children from a negative or absent relationship with the other parent (Amato, 2001; Deater-Deckard & Dunn, 1999; Emery & Forehand, 1994; Fauber, Forehand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Forehand, Thomas, Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington et al., 1998; Rutter, 1987; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). Further, the stress of parental divorce seems to be experienced differently by boys and girls, and correlates of their successful adaptation may also differ. For example, boys who adapt well often come from homes that combine structure and rules with emotional expressiveness, while the most important factor for girls is a household with reliable support from a caring, competent adult, especially a female caregiver who emphasizes risk-taking and independence (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Werner, 1995).

Socioeconomic status (SES)

Divorce generally results in a decline in the family's standard of living (Emery & Forehand, 1994), especially for women and children (Bianchi, Subaiya, & Kahn, 1997), presenting another stressor. Some research suggests that income level or loss explains only a small portion of adjustment difficulty for children (Amato & Keith, 1991b; Shaw & Emery, 1987; Weitoft, Hjerner, Haglund, & Rosen, 2003) but others argue that these changes are important in explaining differences between children from divorced vs. intact families (Brown & Moran, 1997; McLanahan, 1999; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994) and that particularly low economic status may result in poorer nutrition, lower educational quality, and increased chronic stress (Amato, 2001; Hetherington, 1993).

The relation of parental divorce to SES may extend into adulthood, as well, through economically relevant patterns that begin early in life. For example, children from divorced families are more likely to choose non-marital cohabitation and earlier sexual relations than are children from intact families and are more likely to drop out of school and achieve a lower level of education (Frustenberg & Teitler, 1994; Tucker et al., 1997) which may impact their earning power later on.

Personal characteristics and behaviors

Individual characteristics such as a child's sex, temperament, personality, and personal achievement have been studied in order to determine their harmful or protective effects when coupled with a trauma such as parental divorce (Amato, 2001; Clarke-Stewart &

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