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0521616603 - Understanding the Divorce Cycle: The Children of Divorce in their Own  
Marriages  
Nicholas H. Wolfinger  
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ONE

Introduction

My parents divorced while I was in junior high and it changed my life. I eventually realized it was for the best, seeing in retrospect what a mess they had made of their marriage. I think I learned a lot about what makes a relationship go bad, things that will help me when I decide to get married. One thing is for certain: I will not repeat the mistakes my parents made. The whole thing was really painful, and there is no way I will put myself or my children through it.

I OFTEN HEAR STORIES like that from students in my undergraduate course on divorce and remarriage. These students clearly want to learn from their experiences and do better in their own marriages. But their aspirations face unfavorable odds: Growing up in a divorced family greatly increases the chances of ending one's own marriage – a phenomenon called the divorce cycle, or the intergenerational transmission of divorce.

This book examines how the divorce cycle has transformed family life in contemporary America. Although researchers established years ago that divorce runs in families, many of the details remain unknown. Far too often, divorce transmission is just part of the long and ever-growing list of maladies associated with parental divorce. Not enough is known about the circumstances surrounding divorce transmission, the conditions under which it flourishes, and what decreases the chances that children will repeat the marital experiences of their parents.

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## UNDERSTANDING THE DIVORCE CYCLE

**Marriage and Divorce: Coexisting American Institutions**

Divorce is at least a hypothetical possibility for almost everyone, because almost everybody gets married. Despite well-publicized declines in the marriage rate, at least 90 percent of Americans will wed at some point in their lives.<sup>1</sup> Popular sentiment in recent years has created a very different impression. Past age forty, a *Newsweek* article claimed, American women are more likely to be killed by terrorists than they are to get married.<sup>2</sup> Soaring rates of nonmarital cohabitation have contributed to this impression, as have the well-publicized “fatherless” pregnancies of Madonna, Jodie Foster, and other celebrities. Yet the popular impression is essentially false, the product of minor dips in the marriage rate coupled with substantial increases in the average marriage age. Just as it has been throughout American history, marriage continues to be a normal, expected, and desired way of life for almost all of us.

By the start of the twenty-first century, divorce also had become part of American life. The divorce rate rose throughout much of the twentieth century, really taking off during the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> The divorce boom (as the increases from about 1965–79 have come to be called) remains startling when contrasted with the comparatively low divorce rate of the 1950s. Today, about one in two new marriages will fail. Of children born in the late 1970s, 40 percent experienced the breakup of their families, compared to only about 11 percent of those born in the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> More recently, the pendulum has begun to swing the other way. Since 1979, the divorce rate has stabilized, perhaps in part because people are marrying older and are not rushing into unstable relationships.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, the divorce rate remains higher than it was in the early 1960s, before the boom began, and higher than at any other time in American history.

The divorce revolution is much more than a dramatic demographic change. Americans’ acceptance (or at least tolerance) of divorce has increased to the point that generally it is no longer construed as a moral failing.<sup>6</sup> Divorced adults and their children do not bear the stigma they once did. Divorced characters are commonplace in today’s movies, literature, and television shows.<sup>7</sup> Self-help books

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covering all aspects of marital dissolution fill our bookstores – a recent trip to my local Borders revealed over fifty titles, and these offerings do not even begin to scratch the surface of the vast academic literature on divorce.

As early as the 1930s, researchers suggested that marital troubles might run in families.<sup>8</sup> More than twenty studies conducted over the last thirty years confirmed that the children of divorce are disproportionately likely to end their own marriages.<sup>9</sup> Additional studies have shown that people from divorced families often avoid marriage altogether.<sup>10</sup> Still other researchers have considered related topics, such as the relationship between parental divorce and marital satisfaction.<sup>11</sup> Despite so many studies, the research literature in this area remains curiously diffuse. There have been no review essays and no monographs devoted to the divorce cycle. Many important questions remain unanswered: Does parental divorce raise or lower offspring marriage rates? To what extent can the timing of marriage explain the relationship between parental divorce and marital instability in their offspring? Does experiencing multiple divorces while growing up increase the likelihood of ending one's own marriage? Do the children of divorce fare worse in second and third marriages? How has the divorce cycle changed over time? What about the effects of parental divorce on cohabitation, a new family form that gained remarkable ground in the last few decades? This book will answer these questions.

Lack of insight into the divorce cycle would be far less significant if divorce itself had only a modest impact on those it touches. Some people do view divorce as a customary (if unpleasant) part of contemporary life.<sup>12</sup> Other people have gone a step further by highlighting divorce's benefits: Unhappy people no longer have to be trapped in loveless marriages; women now enjoy a hitherto unknown economic freedom to seek greener pastures; children fare better if freed from parental conflict.<sup>13</sup> Some writers even seem to welcome divorce, claiming that traditional families offer no significant advantages over single parenting.<sup>14</sup>

Most people dispute neither the right of couples to dissolve a toxic union, nor the benefits of economic conditions that sometimes give

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women the freedom to leave a bad marriage, nor the contention that it is disastrous for children to be subjected to ongoing parental conflict. That said, it is important to recognize that divorce often does have grievous consequences for both parents and children. Divorced adults report lower levels of well-being, socially and psychologically, than do people who are married, continuously single, or widowed.<sup>15</sup> Divorce often leaves women impoverished – so much so that single mothers are several times as likely as two-parent families to be poor.<sup>16</sup> Economic deprivation while growing up has been linked to poor physical health, diminished intellectual ability and academic achievement, out-of-wedlock pregnancies and births, and various other psychological and social difficulties.<sup>17</sup> Less well known is the fact that divorce shortens the average life span, particularly for men. At age forty-eight, 88 percent of married men will live to age sixty-five, compared to 65 percent of divorced men.<sup>18</sup> For these reasons alone the divorce cycle is worthy of study.

And there is more. Irrespective of its economic consequences, divorce has numerous negative effects on offspring well-being. Compared to people raised in intact families, the children of divorce have more emotional problems, are more likely to drop out of school, and are more likely to smoke, drink, and be sexually active as teenagers.<sup>19</sup> Many of these problems extend into adulthood. People from divorced families on average report worse psychological well-being, more marital problems, and greater alcohol and tobacco consumption than do people from intact families. Perhaps more noteworthy is the fact that adult offspring of divorced families have an approximately one-third greater chance of dying prematurely.<sup>20</sup> Not all children are adversely affected by parental divorce (family structure is only one of many factors responsible for how children fare), but it is strongly correlated with many different aspects of offspring well-being.<sup>21</sup>

Divorce is an important topic for study because it has so many consequences for well-being. Its transmission between generations perpetuates a cycle, adding a whole new dimension. Many families have more than one child; having grown up in divorced families, these children will be more likely to end their own marriages. Thus, each divorce can affect many future marriages.<sup>22</sup> The transmission of

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divorce between generations, in short, can be thought of as a cascade. Ending a marriage starts a cycle that threatens to affect increasing numbers of people over time, a sobering thought in an era when half of all new marriages fail.

### Divorce and Public Policy

California enacted the nation's first modern no-fault divorce law in 1970, making it far easier for state residents to end their marriages. In the next two decades every other state followed suit. Since then, no-fault divorce laws have been attacked repeatedly as the cause of the divorce boom and all its ensuing woes. Make divorce more difficult to obtain (its critics suggest) and numerous social problems can be alleviated. This line of thinking has been partially realized in Louisiana, Arizona, and Arkansas, where "covenant marriage" laws have created two-tiered divorce systems. Couples in these states can now opt for regular marriage (which can be dissolved in accordance with existing no-fault statutes) or covenant marriages (in which divorce is much more difficult to obtain). Grounds for divorce under most covenant marriage laws resemble fault-based statutes of years gone by, and include adultery, abuse, imprisonment, abandonment, or separation for two years.

Despite popular concern about high divorce rates, covenant marriage has so far proved unsuccessful. In Louisiana, for instance, only about 2 percent of couples opt for it. Nevertheless, politicians and family activists continue to push for the modification or repeal of no-fault laws.<sup>23</sup>

The rhetoric of this divorce reform movement often centers on how marital dissolution affects children. Consider the press release that accompanied Rep. Brian Joyce's introduction of antidivorce legislation in the Georgia State House of Representatives:

All around us, every day, we see the bitter fruit of the breakdown of the family. A recent study shows the larger portion of single parent homes are the result of divorce. This contributes heavily to our juvenile crime rate, and accounts for millions of dollars in public

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assistance to the abandoned families. I believe the breakdown of the family is a direct result of our “no-fault” laws.<sup>24</sup>

This book contributes to current debates on family policy by quantifying the extent to which parental divorce begets offspring divorce, and by identifying the segments of the population for which divorce transmission is most likely.

### Outline of Book

In Chapter 2, I try to answer what at first glance might seem an obvious question: Why does parental divorce have such strong effects on offspring well-being in general, and on offspring marital behavior in particular? The answer is far from simple, especially since social-scientific opinion has changed dramatically over time. The initial culprit was thought to be father absence – meaning children need a male role model to develop properly. This notion dominated research prior to the mid-1960s, and to this day remains common. As we will see, it has been discredited. Next, researchers assumed that the consequences of parental family structure had to be attributable to anything *but* divorce or father absence. Economic factors, race- and gender-based discrimination, and stigma were assumed to make all the difference. By the 1980s, social scientists finally started taking a more even-handed approach. Almost no stone was left unturned as researchers used ever-more-sophisticated methodologies to explore almost every aspect of the relationship between parental divorce and offspring well-being. Is it the conflict to which children in divorced families are exposed? Or socioeconomic differences between one- and two-parent families? Maybe it has to do with the neighborhoods in which divorced children are often raised. On the other hand, perhaps children’s problems are present long before their parent’s marital difficulties ever surface. If this were the case, it might seem that divorce hurt the children, when really it was the children who hurt their parents’ marriage. Finally, researchers have even considered whether there may be a genetic component to the divorce cycle. Chapter 2 evaluates all of these explanations, with the intention

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of identifying the mechanisms that link parental divorce to offspring marital difficulties. Ultimately, I show that the divorce cycle can be attributed primarily to the lessons children learn about relationship skills and marital commitment, and secondarily to the effects of parental divorce on offspring marriage formation and educational attainment. These explanations provide a template for my empirical inquiries into the heritability of divorce.

Chapters 3 through 6 present empirical results. Divorce is always preceded by marriage, so Chapter 3 addresses how the children of divorce go about getting married. Relatively few studies have linked the marital conditions of the children of divorce to their subsequent conubial difficulties. I show that parental divorce affects both marriage timing and the kinds of partners offspring choose. In particular, the children of divorce often marry young and often wed other children of divorce – both choices that bode poorly for marital stability.

In Chapter 4, I show how these and other factors affect the divorce cycle. Children's experiences in nonintact families are varied. Many will have stepparents, and some will see their new families dissolve. I show how these different family types produce different rates of divorce transmission. This chapter also examines whether the divorce cycle persists across various sociodemographic boundaries. Factors that exacerbate or attenuate divorce transmission are identified. Finally, I ascertain whether the children of divorce are likely to dissolve second and third marriages as well as their initial unions. Perhaps people from divorced families enter into ill-fated "starter marriages," then learn from their mistakes and get it right the second time around. The alternative hypothesis is that remarriages have the same problems that plagued participants' initial attempts at matrimony. This is an important issue given that over two-thirds of divorced people remarry.<sup>25</sup>

I then turn to the question of how the divorce cycle has changed over time. Chapter 5 shows that the effect of parental divorce on offspring marital stability has weakened significantly since 1973. To understand this finding, we must consider historical developments in popular attitudes toward divorce. Before the divorce boom, growing up with parental divorce was a much different experience than it is

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today. The stigma of coming from a “broken home” often interfered with the formation of normal relationships after the divorce, while seeing a parent’s marriage fail at a time when divorce was uncommon sent children a stronger message about the impermanence of marital vows than it does today. For these and other reasons, divorce no longer takes such a heavy toll on offspring marital behavior.

Chapter 5 also traces the rapid declines in the marriage rate for the children of divorce. Although all young people are less likely to wed than they used to be, declines in the marriage rate have been especially pronounced for people from divorced families. Turning their backs on marriage, children of divorce have been likely to live with partners out of wedlock in recent years.

Chapter 6 considers how the children of divorce fare in nonmarital live-in relationships. Overall, parental divorce has much weaker effects on the stability of cohabiting relationships than it does on marital stability. I explain this discrepancy by showing that marriage and cohabitation are fundamentally different kinds of relationships. Given the inherent instability of cohabiting unions, incremental disadvantages conferred by parental divorce make little difference. On the other hand, the children of divorce are less likely to marry their live-in partners than are people from intact families.

Chapter 7 summarizes findings with the intention of presenting a comprehensive portrait of the divorce cycle. Although parental divorce can be hard on children, its effects are less severe than they used to be. This finding provides the basis for a discussion of divorce policy. I contend that it would be a grievous mistake for states to weaken or abrogate their no-fault divorce laws. When divorce was rare, parental divorce had much stronger effects on offspring marital behavior than it does today. Returning to the age of tough divorce laws would re-create the social conditions that made divorce harder on children.

**Data**

Chapters 3–6 are based on analysis of two national data sets: the General Social Survey (GSS); and the National Survey of Families



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and Households (NSFH). Both provide the advantages typically associated with large national surveys. Sample sizes of over 10,000 people enable study of relatively uncommon phenomena, such as the consequences of experiencing multiple divorces while growing up. National surveys like these also provide a comparison group of people who grew up in intact families. This allows analysts to ascertain what “normal” marital behavior looks like, and how it differs from the behavior of people from divorced families. The NSFH has the advantage of unusually detailed data on marriage and divorce histories, for both respondents and their families of origin. Although not as detailed, the GSS has been repeated annually or biennially over a period of more than thirty years, which makes it possible to show how the divorce cycle has changed over time. Both data sets, along with the methods used to analyze them, are described more fully in Appendix A.

**Toward a Balanced Portrait of the Divorce Cycle**

This is a fortunate time to be studying marital dissolution. Everyone acknowledges that the divorce rate is high, and it is no longer novel to contend that divorce has lasting consequences for offspring well-being. Substantial improvements in survey data and statistical analysis have made it possible to address new issues, and to address existing questions with far greater precision. Thirty years have passed since social scientists reliably demonstrated that divorce runs in families. The extant research has been useful in identifying the mechanisms responsible for divorce transmission; in other words, the linkage that connects parental divorce to offspring divorce.

The last few years have produced renewed public interest in the consequences of coming from a divorced family. On one side has been the research of Judith Harris, who claims that divorce has absolutely no intrinsic effect on children.<sup>26</sup> Any observable effects, she contends, can be attributed to factors such as genetics and residential mobility. The opposing position is best represented by Judith Wallerstein, whose basic message is that children growing up in a

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divorced family very often suffer grievous long-term consequences.<sup>27</sup> Prominent among these are erratic patterns of marriage formation and dissolution.

Wallerstein's research has produced a flurry of popular interest, including a cover story in *Time* magazine.<sup>28</sup> For years academic researchers have criticized Wallerstein's work, generally focusing on methodological issues. Instead of a nationally representative sample, her sixty subject families came from seekers of mental health services in affluent Marin County, just north of San Francisco. Many of the parents in these families had preexisting psychiatric problems, and it is no surprise that "troubled parents often raise troubled children."<sup>29</sup> In light of such issues, Wallerstein's findings merit careful scrutiny.

But Wallerstein has brought the consequences of divorce to the fore. Irrespective of the methodological shortcomings, her clinical profiles have been useful in chronicling *what can happen* as a result of parental divorce. What remains to be learned is *how often it happens*. Just how much does parental divorce increase the chances of offspring divorce? How has this relationship changed over time? How does parental divorce affect the union-formation behavior of offspring? What about cohabitation, a new family form that gained remarkable ground in the last few decades? This book will answer these questions.