



The effects of parental marital discord and divorce on the religious and spiritual lives of young adults [☆]

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ABSTRACT

A growing literature reveals that parental divorce and marital discord can have undesirable effects on the mental health and social well-being of children, some of which extend well into adulthood. Our study augments this body of work by focusing on the interplay of divorce and discord in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of young adults. Several discrete subgroups of young adults are identified in terms of parental marital status and degree of parents' marital conflict, and multiple religious and spiritual outcomes are considered. Data are taken from the National Survey on the Moral and Spiritual Lives of Young Adults from Divorced and Intact Families, a nationwide US telephone survey of approximately 1500 young adults ages 18–35 conducted in 2001. Findings confirm that persons raised by parents in intact, happy, low-conflict marriages tend to score higher on most religious and spiritual outcomes. However, offspring from divorced families and those from intact high-conflict families differ on some outcomes, but not others. Indicators of traditional institutional religious practices and beliefs appear more vulnerable to the effects of parental divorce and discord than personal spiritual beliefs and practices. Overall, findings reveal a rich but complex set of relationships between family background and religious and spiritual lives among young adults.

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1. Introduction

Divorce rates in the US rose sharply beginning in the 1960s, before leveling off in the early-mid 1980s at historically high levels (Heaton, 2002; Cherlin, 2004). These patterns have raised concerns among scholars, policymakers, and the public about the implications of parental divorce for offspring. Although much of the research on this topic has centered on outcomes during childhood and adolescence, several studies also demonstrate that the effects of parental divorce can reach well into adulthood, and there is mounting evidence that children raised in intact, two-parent families tend to fare better on a host of psychological, social, and behavioral outcomes than those raised in other types of households (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995; Amato and Booth, 1997; Amato, 2001). More recent studies have attempted to disentangle the effects of parental divorce per se from those of parental marital discord, in an effort to determine (a) whether the observed influence

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of divorce may be due partly to exposure to parents' marital conflict, and also (b) whether it is better for children if quarreling parents separate as opposed to remaining married (Amato et al., 1995; Booth and Amato, 2001; Yu et al., 2010).

Scholars have studied the effects of parental divorce and/or marital conflict on a wide array of child and young adult outcomes, ranging from psychological well-being, to behavior problems, to the quality of parent–child relationships (Amato and Booth, 2001; Amato, 2001; Strohschein, 2005). To date, however, few of these studies have focused on the implications of divorce and marital discord for the religious and spiritual lives of young adults. This oversight is surprising for several reasons. Parents' religious identities, practices, and beliefs are by far the strongest predictors of those of their offspring (Hoge et al., 1982; Glass et al., 1986; Sherkat, 1991). The intergenerational transmission of faith commitments has long been a central topic of research interest among sociologists of religion, and it also has important implications for religious organizations, their leaders, and their activities (Sherkat, 1991; Sherkat and Wilson, 1995; Lawton and Bures, 2001). There is a modest body of evidence showing that adolescents and young adults raised in intact, two-parent households are more likely than others to be religious, and specifically adopt the affiliations and practices of their parents (Regnerus and Uecker, 2006; Uecker et al., 2007). This is particularly the case when couples' marital happiness is high (Myers, 1996), and among offspring who report close relationships with their parents (Sherkat and Wilson, 1995). However, this literature is characterized by at least two notable limitations: (a) studies in this tradition have not explored the interplay of parental divorce and marital conflict on the religious and spiritual lives of offspring; and (b) only a handful of outcomes in this domain (e.g., affiliation and denominational "switching," religious attendance) have been examined, yielding an incomplete picture of the reach of parental marital relations into the religious and spiritual lives of young adults.

Our study contributes to this emerging body of work in several specific ways. Drawing lessons from the broader literature on the effects of parental divorce and marital quality on adjustment outcomes among offspring, we use data from an unique sample of approximately 1500 young adults (ages 18–35), evenly divided between children from intact families consisting of two biological parents, and children who experienced parental divorce prior to age 15 (Marquardt, 2005). For the purposes of this analysis, we distinguish among seven groups of young adults: (a) those raised by parents in intact, happy marriages; (b) those whose parents were in unhappy but low-conflict marriages; (c) those whose parents were in high-conflict marriages; (d) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced high levels of conflict during both pre- and post-divorce periods; (e) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced consistently low levels of conflict, both before and after the split; (f) offspring of divorce whose parents experienced high pre-divorce conflict, followed by reductions in conflict after the divorce; and (g) offspring of divorce whose parents exhibited minimal conflict preceding the divorced, but experienced elevated levels of conflict during the post-divorce period. We then estimate a series of multivariate models gauging the net differences among these divorce/marital discord categories on an array of religious and spiritual outcomes in young adulthood, including: (a) frequency of religious attendance and prayer; (b) (dis)interest in religion as a source of truth and meaning; (c) skepticism toward the religiousness and religious sincerity of parents; (d) images of God; (e) positive and negative experiences of God; and (f) religious and spiritual identities. These findings cast fresh light on the complex implications of parental marital discord and divorce on young adults' religiousness and spirituality in an era of relatively high rates of divorce, family change, and religious ferment.

2. Theoretical and empirical background

2.1. Parental discord, divorce, and children's well-being

What difference does family structure make in the lives of children and young adults? On average, children fare better in intact, two-parent families than in other types of households, particularly those characterized by divorce (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001; Hetherington and Kelly, 2002). This general pattern has been remarkably robust across multiple datasets, from multiple countries throughout the developed west, and across an array of indicators of psychological and social well-being (Amato and Sobolewski, 2001). This same finding also persists despite controls for a host of pre-divorce family, child, and parental personality characteristics (Simons et al., 1996; Furstenberg and Kiernan, 2001). Some researchers have incorporated sophisticated study design features to adjust for unobserved heterogeneity (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1995) and genetic similarity among siblings (Kendler et al., 1992), among other potentially confounding factors, but the observed advantages associated with intact, two-parent families persist in these studies as well. According to meta-analyses, children of divorce tend to score somewhat lower than their counterparts from non-divorced homes across most of 15 different measures of well-being, including psychological well-being, self-concept, social well-being, and quality of family relations (Amato, 2001). Although these associations are typically modest in size, they are remarkably consistent, and comparisons across meta-analyses indicate that these associations increased in magnitude during the 1990s (Amato, 2001).¹

¹ Amato (2001) suggests two possible explanations for the observed increase in the negative associations between divorce and well-being during the decade of the 1990s. The first involves a shift in the nature of divorce during the 1990s, such that the more recent divorces may have occurred between couples who are moderately rather than extremely dissatisfied with their marriages. Concurrently, the delay of marriage and increase in nonmarital cohabitation may have led couples who would be poorly matched marital partners to opt for alternative arrangements, leaving those who are better matched to wed and subsequently to enjoy moderate marital satisfaction. Low-conflict divorces that end in divorce may be especially stressful to children and the proportion of these types of divorces may have increased in recent decades. The second explanation for the observed increase lies with the increasing economic disparity between married, two-parent households and single-parent households. Throughout the 1990s, dual-income families may have been in better position to take advantage of the available economic growth, as compared with single-parent families.

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