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.

Keywords: Parental divorce; Mortality risk; Longevity; USA

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, Chatter, 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
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 sys-
tem, 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 vari-
able, and social variables.

Family environment

Interparental conflict and poor parenting skills con-
sistently 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, Fore-
hand, Thomas, & Wierson, 1990; Forehand, Thomas, 
Wierson, Brody, & Fauber, 1990; Hetherington et al., 
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; Weitoff, Hjern, 
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 & Sande-
fur, 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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