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Kaitlyn Larsen Dyshkant
Brigham Young University, kaitlyn.larsen432@gmail.com

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Family Outcomes and Resilience in Adult Children of Late-Life Divorce

Kaitlyn Larsen Dyshkant
Brigham Young University

Between the years of 1990 and 2014, the rate of those divorcing over the age of fifty doubled (Brown & Lin, 2012). While the percentage of young adult divorces is on the decline, the rate of late-life divorces is on the rise (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Stepler, 2020). More research is needed in this area as an increasing number of adults are affected by the divorce of their parents; (the strong majority of research on divorce is concentrated on families with children under the age of 18; Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Greenwood, 2014). Research on late-life divorce and its impact on adult children has increased in its importance and relevance.

A multitude of reasons exist as to why older couples with adult children choose to divorce (Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Crowley, 2017). Older couples sometimes feel that they are growing apart (Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2017; Jensen & Bowen, 2015). When children enter the picture, parents tend to shift their focus from each other to their children (Canham et al., 2014; Doss et al., 2009). This change in focus can lead spouses to stop prioritizing one another; over time, couples can forget how to have fun with each

other, how to laugh together, and how to love each other (Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2017). Additionally, a clear shift can occur in a marriage when the last child leaves the home (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Canham et al., 2014). Some couples experience tension in their relationship for many years but are held together as a couple in a united effort to raise their children (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2017). In fact, as adult children leave the home, couples find themselves fully exposed to one another as they no longer have their children in the middle to cushion their differences (Sumner, 2013). When children leave the family home, so can the couple's purpose in being together.

In other cases, couples realize that they do not want to spend the final portion of their life unhappy and find a late-life divorce liberating (Brown & Lin, 2012). In fact, America values individualism, as shown by trends toward individualistic attitudes (Natarajan, 2021). This manifests itself in marriage through attitudes that marriage exists for the purpose of personal satisfaction (Randles & Avishai, 2018; Skrbis et al., 2021). This, coupled with modern increased life

expectancy, can leave couples who feel unfulfilled in their marriage itching to leave (Brown & Lin, 2012; Canham et al., 2014; Crowley, 2017). These changes in tendencies, family makeup, and perspectives can ultimately lead to late-life divorce.

One particularly painful and common reason for late-life divorce is the uncovering of affairs (Crowley, 2017; Papernow, 2017). Sometimes, as tastes and definitions of intimacy change and no longer match that of their partner's, the individual's satisfaction in their marriage decreases (Crowley, 2017; Stokes et al., 2020). Occasionally, a sexually unsatisfied partner will seek satisfaction outside of the marriage, resulting in affairs and the destruction of the marriage partnership (Stokes et al., 2020). Infidelity itself is the cause of up to 40% of divorces (Marín et al., 2014). Most typically, affairs instigated by a woman in a partnership occur between 7 and 10 years into the marriage, while affairs instigated by the man in the partnership happen after 11 years of marriage (Ziv et al., 2017). Further analysis of this data reveals that affairs are typically undiscovered until much later in the marriage and therefore, in the context of late-life divorces, result in infidelity as a significant reason for divorce (Crowley, 2017; Ziv et al., 2017).

Late-life divorce rates have increased in recent years and occur for many different and usually personal reasons. Unfortunately, few studies have researched the effects of late-life divorce on adult children (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood,

2014). Although divorce literature often ignores the impact of late-life divorce on families, the outcomes on adult children of late-life divorce are significant and impact rooted-family relationships and roles (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Jensen & Bowen, 2015). However, the effect of the divorce can be mediated by factors of resiliency (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Graham et al., 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Le et al., 2019; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020). This review will first discuss family outcomes in situations of late-life divorce and then explore the patterns observed in resilient adult children of late-life divorce.

Outcomes of Late-Life Divorce in Adult Children

For decades, social scientists have concentrated a branch of their study on the effects that divorce has on children, but only recently has research on adult children of late-life divorce started to become more of a priority (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Brown & Lin, 2012). Separate research on adult children of divorce is important as divorce tends to impact them differently than their younger counterparts (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood, 2014). Adult children of families who experience late-life divorce see outcomes such as strained parent-child relationships, the needs of the adult children not being met, and impacts on psychological well-being (Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). As these late-life divorces are becoming more common, understanding the outcomes on adult children

of late-life divorce is becoming increasingly important (Brown & Lin, 2012; Canham et al., 2014).

Strained Parent-Child Relationships and Role Shifts

When a late-life divorce occurs, the family often experiences changes that can strain the parent-child relationship (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Campbell, 1995; Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Sumner, 2013). Research performed by Marjory Campbell (1995) found that when a late-life divorce occurs, the parents may lean on their children and the adult children can become mediators between parents. While young children of divorce are often shielded from many of the details of the divorce, adult children are not frequently afforded the same protection (Leustek & Theiss, 2017). Instead, adult children may have a greater understanding of and involvement in their parents' divorce and conflicts (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Bowen & Jensen, 2017; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). This increased involvement can strain the parent-child relationship (Greenwood, 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015).

Furthermore, role boundaries can become unclear as adult children experience role reversal and the parents rely more fully on the children (Campbell, 1995; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). For example, the parents may rely on the adult children to act as an anchor keeping the family together and to organize family events and rituals (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). The adult children may also experience

emotional parentification, which is when parents turn to their children to fulfill their emotional needs (Campbell, 1995; Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2016). A parent may also rely on the child for needs formerly fulfilled by the other parent, such as financial support, companionship, and health and physical care (including sometimes living with the child full-time Brown & Lin, 2012; Campbell, 1995; Canham et al., 2014; Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Sumner, 2013). This reliance can add stress and tension to the parent-child relationship (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Campbell, 1995; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018).

Needs of Adult Children Not Being Met

Another significant outcome seen in adult children of divorce is that the needs of the adult children are often unmet (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). Although adult children are typically viewed as independent of their parents, they may still have some social, financial, and emotional needs that the parent-child relationship fulfills. These needs can be stressed when a late-life divorce occurs (Antonovsky, 1986; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018).

For example, adult children's social needs, usually fulfilled by their parents, are damaged as conversations turn away from the child and focus instead on the parents, the relationship breakdown between the parents, and the needs of the parents (Campbell, 1995; Leustek & Theiss, 2017). Financially, the strain on the family's resources increases, and

the adult children are likely to lose financial support and some of the opportunities that money from their parents can provide, such as family vacations and investments (Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Sharma, 2015; Sumner, 2013). Finally, the emotional needs of the adult child that are typically met by their parents can be diminished by emotional triangulation, knowledge of reasons leading to the divorce, and the personal emotional effects of the divorce of one's parents (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Campbell, 1995; Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2016). The lack of these needs being met causes stress on the family system during cases of late-life divorce (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018).

Impacts on Psychological Well-Being

As with young children of divorce, adult children of divorce generally experience negative effects on their psychological well-being (Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). Most adult children of late-life divorce experience a significant shift in their worldview when the family that has been a foundation for them suddenly becomes disrupted and broken during a time that is already riddled with complexities and challenges for the adult child (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Greenwood, 2014; Jensen & Bowen, 2015). The sudden shift in the family relationships and in their parents' marriage is likely to cause adult children to question their beliefs and understandings regarding finding and sustaining their own lifelong marriages or relationships or the likelihood thereof (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018;

Roper et al., 2019). As a result, many adult children of divorce experience difficulties with their own relationships and struggle with commitment and trust (Graham et al., 2012). Many children of divorce additionally experience a crisis of belonging. For adult children, this can be earth-shattering as their lifelong identity and sense of belonging has been attached to an intact family of origin that has now become broken (Greenwood, 2012; Sumner, 2013).

In summary, important elements of psychological well-being—such as positive relationships with others, autonomy, and stability—are often compromised when adult children experience the late-life divorce of their parents (Graham et al., 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Greenwood, 2012; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). On the other hand, sometimes the adult children have long been aware of the conflict between their parents and find a sense of psychological relief in their separation, making it easier to accept the change (Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Sumner, 2013). Nonetheless, the psychological impacts of late-life divorce on adult children can be significant as adult children of divorce tend to adopt a negative view of marriage and have trouble trusting in relationships throughout their life (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Sumner, 2013).

Patterns in Resilient Adult Children of Divorce

Although many of the typical outcomes in adult children of divorce are negative, some healthy patterns of resiliency have been identified in families

who avoid these negative outcomes (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Graham et al., 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). Some of these patterns of resilience include close relationships between the parents and their adult children, the adult children's relationships with others, and the adult children's spirituality and ability to forgive (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Graham et al., 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Le et al., 2019; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Wright et al., 2020). Understanding these patterns of resiliency can provide insight into how adult children of divorce can overcome the stress of the divorce and bypass or minimize the negative consequences thereof (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018).

Close Relationship With Parents

One healthy pattern of resiliency found in some adult children of late-life divorce is having a close, secure relationship with their parents (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Jensen & Bowen, 2015). In one study, one-half of adult children of divorce who did not experience negative relationships with their parents at the time of divorce claimed to have always had a close relationship with their parents (Greenwood, 2012). A close relationship with the parents can create a foundation for boundary setting and healthy communication patterns at the time of the divorce (Greenwood, 2014; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). Furthermore, maintaining a close, healthy relationship with both parents during and after the divorce predicts future healthy relationships for the adult child (Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018; Roper et al., 2019). Hav-

ing close relationships with one's parents creates resiliency as the family transitions through late-life parental divorce.

Autonomy From Parents and Connection With Others

Furthermore, the more independent and autonomous adult children are from their parents, the greater their ability is to be resilient (Abetz & Wang, 2017; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018). Autonomy builds resiliency by allowing adult children of divorce to choose their perceptions, feel a sense of control in their lives, and create healthy distractions (Thomas & Woodside, 2011). For example, if the adult child is independent, then they are likely to feel less-direct effects of the divorce than an adult child who still has some significant measure of dependency on their parent(s). The adult child's autonomy in relation to their parents plays a significant role in the overall resiliency of the adult child through the divorce of their parents (Jensen & Bowen, 2015; Mikucki-Enyart et al., 2018).

Feelings and perceptions of social support can have significant influence on the children's overall resilience to the divorce of their parents. This social support and connectedness can come from immediate family, extended family, social groups, and friends (Colen & Pereira, 2019; Wright et al., 2020). Intimate friendships can have power in increasing the resiliency of adult children of divorce through their stability and depth (Colen & Pereira, 2019; Kirk, 2002). Despite the negative consequences

of late-life divorce on adult children, adult children are able to find strength in a perception of an emotional, mental, and physical support network (Colen & Pereira, 2019; Thomas & Woodside, 2011; Wright et al., 2020). Having a social network nearby ready to provide support and companionship to adult children of divorce results in resilience.

Spirituality and the Ability to Forgive

Additionally, a strong spiritual foundation can give strength to and increase the resiliency of adult children facing the divorce of their older parents (Le et al., 2019; Pandya, 2017). Significant stressors are a common part of adulthood, and finding meaning, purpose, and peace during hardship, such as the divorce of an adult's parents, is a benefit of spirituality (Jastrzębski, 2020; Le et al., 2019; Pandya, 2017). Spirituality helps adult children attribute meaning to their parent's divorce, which significantly impacts their resiliency (Jensen & Bowen, 2015). The adult child's capacity to forgive their parents—an important element of spirituality—builds resiliency (Graham et al., 2012). When adult children of divorce adopt a forgiveness mindset, their attitudes about the divorce can become healthy and more positive (Exline et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2012; Jensen & Bowen, 2015). This provides these

adult children with a foundation of resilience in the face of divorce. This can look like forgiving their parents for the negative consequences the children have experienced as a result of the divorce as well as forgiving their parents for their mistakes or weaknesses that might have contributed to the divorce. Spirituality and forgiveness enable a mental reframing of the divorce which allows for healing and growth and minimizes negative effects (Maio et al., 2008; Zagrean et al., 2020).

Conclusion

No matter the cause, late-life divorce has the potential to impact the entire family system. As the prevalence of late-life divorce increases, understanding the impacts of late-life divorce on adult children is becoming increasingly critical. Ultimately, late-life divorce can affect the couple's adult children through strained parent-child relationships, the needs of the adult children not being met, impacts on their psychological well-being, and additional burdens being placed on their shoulders. Although more research is needed, adult children of divorce can find strength in many paths to resilience, including their relationships with others, their spirituality, and the nature of their relationships with their parents.

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