Psychoanalytic Psychology
2013, Vol. 30, No. 2, 167–187

0736-9735/13/$12.00 DOI: 10.1037/a0032511

MOTHERS AND THEIR CHILDREN AFTER DIVORCE: *Report From a 25-Year Longitudinal Study*

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This is a qualitative 25-year, longitudinal study of mother–child relationships in a middle-class, nonlitigating, divorced California population. At the time of divorce, all children were clinically evaluated to be on target academically and developmentally. The mothers had functioned competently as protective affectionate parents within the marriage. We found that over half of the mothers, especially those with two or more minor children, were significantly less available and less responsive to their children in the postdivorce years than during the failing marriage. One third of the mothers turned their priority from parenting during four or more immediate, postdivorce years to rebuilding intimate relationships along with intensive training to achieve economic independence. During these years, many of the adolescents engaged in delinquent activities and truancy, which subsided when the mother resumed supervision and stabilized family life. A striking collapse in maternal parenting occurred for one quarter of the mothers who struggled during the failed marriage with psychiatric problems and, following divorce, lost access to ongoing psychological treatment and stable family structure. Most failed to recover and were cared for by their adolescent children who themselves were in desperate need of parenting and support. These findings challenge the view of divorce as a time-limited crisis from which children with continued access to both parents will recover in under a year after the litigation is completed. The mother–child

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attachment suffers with the diminished parenting that often follows as a result of variables that require further investigation.

Keywords: divorced mother−child relationships, influences on attachment, postdivorce parenting, adolescent vulnerability postdivorce, remarriage with children

Parenting after divorce, whether in sole or joint custody, differs significantly from parenting that occurs in the married family. The subject of our inquiry is how the divorced mother's financial and emotional resources and changing roles impact her parenting over the postdivorce years, the consequences for her own life, as well as her attachment to and subsequent relationships with her children. Ongoing reports of the efforts of divorced women and men to resolve conflicts and to build new intimate relationships have shown a wide range of success and failure. Additionally, research has reported that many divorced mothers live in reduced economic circumstances, and that there is consequent suffering in many female-headed households (Teachman & Paasch, 1994; Grall, 2011). We propose that the mother's age and resources, the circumstances of the divorce, the number and age of the children, the course and quality of the mother's life during the postdivorce years may govern the quality of the mother−child relationship and attachment, and the child's response to the changes, as much or more than the parent's passions at the break up, which have, to this point, received the lion's share of professional and public attention.

The immediate tasks that parents confront at divorce are formidable. They include the wrenching separation of their personal lives, and the simultaneous building of two functioning households at the same time that they are faced with the clamor of anxious children. Despite the enhanced need of children for time and support at this crisis, there typically occurs a decline in the amount and quality of parental care, which we and others have reported to endure an average of two years (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). The issues we explore here relate to the mother's parenting during the years that follow as the acute crisis subsides, as she seeks to regain her psychological balance and to resolve the passions of the marital failure, and as she establishes, or fails to establish, a reasonably stable, economically viable household and child care, as a single, remarried, or repartnered parent. Her tasks also include establishing a working relationship with the children's father, and often, with a stepmother and stepchildren, whose sometimes dissonant voices add to the complex mix. These powerful demands, along with others, reshape the divorced mother's entire life and, as we report here, her ability to maintain consistent attachments with all of her children and, consequently, the quality of her parenting.

The psychological roots of mothering have been understood in psychoanalysis and attachment theory to lie in the mother's earliest attachment patterns and identifications that date back to her own infancy and childhood experiences (Chodorow, 1978; Steele & Steele, 1999). Maternal feelings, attitudes, and relationship with the individual child are also shaped in the course of interaction with that child as she grows, and they are continually reshaped by the mother's conscious and unconscious memories, conflicts, anxieties, and defenses at each developmental stage. Of import for this report, the mother−child relationship is nourished and strengthened by the love, appreciation, and support, which are provided in a good enough, enduring marriage and even in, we will argue, a failing marriage. Following divorce, the mother is faced with the enormous task

of compartmentalizing her anger, hurt, and disappointment in the failed marriage, and of maintaining that cauldron of feelings separate from her parenting, and, in fact, separate from her continuing relationship with her ex-husband. Additionally, the mother typically must confront the greater economic pressures of postdivorce life, the loneliness of sole parenting, and the vulnerabilities of entering the postdivorce social scene as a woman alone with children to attend. Inevitably, mothers' powerful longings for love, sex, and companionship conflict with equally powerful pressures of caring for her children. The emotional scaffolding of the marriage that created and supported the parent−child unit disappears, and mothers (as well as fathers) must have resources, heretofore unimagined, to fill this void to maintain emotional connection to their children and to create a new parenting structure. These internal and external conflicts play out in the psyche of the individual mother, and each woman resolves them in her own way. Some women are observed to remain trapped in the angers and disappointments of the breakup, while others move on to a happier life alone or in a new relationship. Studies have also shown a wide range of difficulties among the children, which often crescendo as they reach adulthood (Wallerstein et al., 2000).

Literature Review

Findings from several different perspectives call attention to changes in mother−child relationships during the years following divorce. Several quantitative studies have found that divorced mothers experience a decrease in perceived social support and an increase in maternal hardship, deprivation, and parental stress (Osborne, Berger, & Magnuson, 2012). Studies of mother−child relationships in divorced families have also reported that divorced mothers show less warmth, sensitivity, and monitoring of the children compared with parents in two-parent families. The investigators have generally attributed the changed mothering that they observed to the stress of significantly reduced income and the impoverishment of many divorced mothers (Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992; Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamäki, 2002).

Several researchers have found that divorce is associated with weakened emotional bonds between parents and children in adulthood (Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). A major study of intergenerational relationships also found that divorce weakens generational closeness (Silverstein, & Bengtson, 1997). A major study of parent–child relations in divorced families from first divorce over two succeeding generations (Amato & Cheadle, 2005) found greater tensions between both parents and their children in each of the three generations, compared with comparable intact families. Other research has reported greater warmth and closeness between divorced mothers and their daughters, lasting well into adulthood, compared with mother−daughter relationships in intact families (Arditti, 1999).

Clinical studies have also stressed some of the difficulties experienced by mothers and children. One recent study followed 37 children from high-conflict divorcing families over 15−20 years postdivorce (Johnston, Roseby, & Kuehnle, 2009). The children were raised in joint custody following extended mediation, by litigating parents, who, by and large, failed to resolve their animosity toward each other during subsequent years. By the end of the study, the children, who had reached young adulthood, remained close to both parents in accord with the mediated agreement, but an estimated 40% suffered from grave psychological symptoms. Serious disturbances in parenting were uncovered at the follow-up, which had not been identified in the earlier evaluation process. A longitudinal study

of the attachment patterns of 50 infants and their mothers from intact families who were assessed again 20 years later, using Adult Attachment Interview, reported change from secure to insecure secure attachment patterns in 67% of the young adults who experienced one or more stressful life events such as divorce, death, or other major traumata in their growing up years. This is in significant contrast to a 15% change in those whose lives had not contained such stressful events (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000). This research finding that significant life experience, such as parental divorce, has the power to change parent−child attachment from secure to insecure bears directly on the central focus of this study. Our own research (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2009) has showed striking lapses in the fathers' contact with his children from the first marriage, especially after the father's remarriage or repartnering. High drop out of fathers was reported as well in a very large, recent Canadian study (Juby, Billette, LaPlante, & Le Bourdais, 2007). These recent findings about steeply diminished postdivorce father−child contact strengthened our interest in examining the course of mother−child relations during the postdivorce years.

It is rare that published studies of the long-term course of mother−child postdivorce relationship have factored into the causes for the divorce, the mother's feelings about the divorce, and the mother's economic and emotional resources prior to the divorce, although it is surely reasonable to think that these would be relevant to the mother's mood and outlook on her new responsibilities. Additionally, the common research strategy among academic researchers has been to select for study one "target child" in each family (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002). By including data on the mother and her relationships with all of her children, we are in a unique position to explore differences in mother−child relationships based on whether the mother had one or several children or adolescents in her care.

Our Study

To explore these issues, we drew on a unique qualitative study of 60 families, including both parents and their 131 children in Northern California, who were interviewed by well-trained, experienced clinicians. The interviewers were licensed with special training in clinical work with children. Interviews were acquired at 5-year intervals from the decisive separation prior to the legal divorce over the 25 years that followed. This was a first marriage for 93% of the women and 90% of the men. Mothers' average age when the study started was 34 years and husbands' average age was 37. Although few couples agreed about the decision to divorce, they did not litigate custody or visiting during or after the divorce. The parents were, in the main, a well-educated, middle-class, largely White urban group. At the outset, the children ranged in age from 3−18 years. All children were assessed prior to the study to determine whether they had reached appropriate developmental and academic markers. All were in the sole legal custody of their mothers, although 33% went to live with their fathers for a year or more during adolescence. Half of these youngsters returned to their mother's home after a year.

Each family member was assessed separately in extensive clinical interviews at the outset and subsequently at 18 months, 5 years, 10 years, and 15 years. Eighty-five percent of the now-adult children were located and interviewed extensively at 25 years postdivorce. A comparison of families who did not participate in the 25-year follow-up versus those that did showed no significant difference in parent socioeconomic or educational level or in offspring age or educational level, as last measured at the 10-year follow-up.

Several clinicians continued through the 10-year follow-up. At the 25-year follow-up, excepting the senior author, interviews were conducted by a new group of trained clinicians. Interviews were structured and covered predetermined content areas pertaining to the divorce, the course of lives following divorce, as well as relationships, perceptions, and feelings about parents and the postdivorce years. The same interviews were used at each time period, with questions added to cover the development of the children into adulthood. Complete information on the content of these interviews and the methods used in data-gathering, reduction, and analyses may be found in Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) and Wallerstein et al. (2000). Interviewing all siblings and both parents separately provided important data from multiple perspectives; relative continuity of interviewers and interview methods created a quick and intense interaction resulting in a rich record of each participant's story at multiple developmental stages following divorce. The findings from the study, which lasted from 1971−2000, have been reported in detail in four widely translated books and over 80 articles in professional journals. Two recently published articles reported discrepancies in long-term outcomes for siblings and the course of father−child relationships over the 25 years postdivorce (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007, 2009). This report contributes additional information to the body of knowledge through our examination of the vicissitudes in the postdivorce mother−child relationship and the inclusion of data about the mothers' pre- and postdivorce history not previously reported.

Profile of the Mothers and Their Children

This report is based on 48 mothers and their 110 children, who were interviewed over the 25-year postseparation period. Three distinct groups, based on continuity in maternal parenting, emerged from the longitudinal data, as follows below.

Group A: Continuity in Good Parenting

Mothers in Group A maintained responsible and responsive parenting with all of their children consistently over the 25 years postdivorce. They gave priority to child rearing during the marriage, and continued to do so after the divorce, whether they remained a single parent or remarried. Represented in this group are 46% of the mothers in the study: 22 mothers and 50 mother−child relationships.

Group B: Downturn in Parenting: Often Restored Years Later

Mothers in Group B showed diminished time and supervision of their children over four or more critical years immediately after the divorce. Sometimes the disrupted contact was restored after many years when the child reached adulthood. This group contained 29% of the mothers in the study: 14 mothers and 36 mother−child relationships.

Group C: Collapse in Maternal Parenting

For women in Group C, the divorce ushered in a period of instability, isolation, and depression, which severely limited their capacity to provide adequate parenting to their children. Tragically, the downward course continued during the 25 years postdivorce. Twenty-five percent of the mothers, which included 12 mothers and 24 mother−child relationships, fell into this group.

Group A: Continuity in Responsible Parenting for All Siblings

Although all in Group A (22 mothers, 50 children) maintained consistent, responsible parenting after the divorce, there were significant differences in the mother–child relationships among those who remained single during the postdivorce years and those who remarried or repartnered. Accordingly, they are described separately.

Women Who Remained Single

All of the women in this group (eight mothers, 19 children) raised their children with affection and consistency, both before and after the divorce. Their mean age at the divorce was 37.8 years. Seven of the eight mothers in this group had two or more children, with four having three or more children. Twenty-five percent of the children were age 5 years or below; 60% were school aged; and 15% were adolescents. All had worked full time during the marriage, although some quit working full time when their third child was born. The women included classroom teachers, a librarian, a probation officer, a registered nurse, and a dressmaker. After the divorce, all worked full time. Often at great personal sacrifice and despite working full time, child care and the well-being of their children retained priority in their lives. Throughout the postdivorce years, their emotional relationships with their children remained the strongest and most important in the mothers' lives. This group of women who remained single carried sole responsibility for raising their children to adulthood. Most received insufficient or irregular financial support from the fathers. All but two fathers remarried or repartnered shortly after the divorce, after which they greatly reduced their contact with their children often to one or two visits a year (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2009). The standard of living of the mother's household declined steeply after the father's remarriage. Mothers were no longer able to support the extracurricular or vacation benefits that their children had enjoyed during the marriage or to contribute significantly to their college tuition. Only two youngsters in this group received financial help from their fathers for college, although all but two of the fathers were college graduates. None of the mothers had hands-on help from the fathers or family members after the divorce. Several mothers lacked health insurance for themselves and their children. As a result, several serious medical conditions went untreated, including one mother's tumor and an undiagnosed partial deafness in a child.

The demands of full-time work, combined with child rearing, were especially heavy for the women with custody of three or more children, who represented half of this group. Several women were chronically tired for years. Combining child care with full-time work was even harder for mothers who sought to improve their financial skills by attending school in the evenings. Several described locking themselves in the bathroom at night to study while their young children sat cross-legged outside the closed door, waiting for their mother to reappear. Only one mother received financial help from grandparents to complete her own college education. Additionally, two mothers, each of whom had three children to care for, had ailing older parents who required her regular hands-on care.

Despite all of these new burdens, mothers in this group were able to keep the needs of their children as top priority. They carefully limited expenditures for their own needs, and they chose jobs that offered limited promotion potential and sometimes little interest, but were reasonably secure, allowing for time at home during early evenings and weekends.

All but one of the women in this group had been content with the marriage and did not expect it to end. All but two of the divorces were triggered by the woman's sudden, heart-breaking discovery of the husband's infidelity. As a result, the mothers were

burdened by mourning the loss of the dreams that the marriage had represented, along with the loss of financial support that had been provided in most of the marriages. Although their sadness, their yearning, and their sense of outrage gradually diminished, few fully recovered from their pain. Vivid intrusive memories and tragic consequence of the betrayal endured, leading to the recognition of the undiagnosed and untreated traumas. Thus one young mother of three preschool children returned after a several-week trip to care for her ill mother to learn from the neighbors that her husband had an affair with a teenager during her absence. Shocked and profoundly distressed at his betrayal during this crisis in her life, she filed for divorce. Shaking her head ruefully, 8 years later, she revealed her disinterest in an attractive attorney who had sought to date her, because, as she told us, "I don't know how to explain this but I have lost *that interes*t since my divorce."

Although the women missed the companionship and sex that the marriage had provided, they were, at the same time, disdainful of the men whom they regarded as irresponsible and impulse ridden. A notable quality in all of these mothers was their ability to keep these feelings separate and largely hidden from their children. They were able to buffer the children's plaintive questions about the absence of the father with answers that preserved the image of the father. Some mothers went further and invited former husbands who sustained a second divorce to a holiday dinner with their children. This is notable because the mothers' largesse was prior to the current recognized importance of coparenting.

Unhappy experiences continued for many years to color this group's expectations of men. With a full-time job and raising two or three children alone, these mothers had limited time to seek out new relationships. Although half of them became involved in one or more brief love affairs, almost all were gradually discouraged about finding a stable, lasting relationship. About half had close friends or were active members of civic organizations and churches. However, they continued over the years to rely on their relationships with their children as the primary sources of their emotional support. This group also grew in their capacity to shoulder the burdens of parenthood and running the household, combined with full-time work. They were proud of their achievements. Many tried successfully to enliven their family life and to make up for the children's loss of interesting vacations and other perks that their classmates enjoyed. One mother managed to take her three sons on an extended biking trip through Europe, which they remembered long after with joy and gratitude.

This group of mothers' continued concern with protecting their children from feeling rejected or deprived formed an important part of the parenting agenda. As fathers withdrew from visiting or supporting their children, one of the major tasks of the mother was to comfort the children over their perceived rejection. Unique to mothers in this group, the women tried their best, over years, to alleviate the children's pain by interpreting the father's withdrawal as caused by factors such as work, rather than by declining interest. This required a sustained effort and the ability to compartmentalize their own enduring feelings of disappointment and betrayal in the man and to continue to value him as a father for the sake of the children.

These mothers were rewarded with gratitude and appreciation for their loyalty and sacrifice. As the children grew older, they were not only profoundly grateful for the mother's love and nurturance, but also acutely aware of their mother's dependence on their presence and concerned that their leaving home would cause her distress. Most of the children idealized their mothers as heroes for maternal sacrifice and devotion while simultaneously pitying their mothers' loneliness and the circumscribed nature of their

lives. One young woman referred to her mother with sorrow as "a woman in chains." Another daughter, now a young woman, said bitterly: "My mother never taught me about men. She didn't know anything."

Women Who Remarried

The mean age of mothers in this group (14 mothers, 31 children) at divorce was 33.4 years. Eleven of the 14 mothers in this group had two children; three women had three children. Thirty-two percent of the children were 5 years old or younger, 39% were school age, and 29% were adolescents. Most of these mothers enjoyed the fruits of well-paid careers, which they had held during the marriage and continued after the divorce. One woman was a practicing physician, another was a senior editor, several were executives in the business world, and others were school administrators. Only two mothers in this subgroup had not worked outside the home during the marriage, and they were generously and continuously supported by their ex-husbands after the separation.

Twelve of the 14 women in this group sought divorce over the objections of their husbands. Accordingly, they entered the postdivorce years with an entirely different history and expectations than did those who remained single. The women who had taken the lead in ending their marriages did not suffer the humiliation and pain that was the legacy of those whose divorce was triggered by the husband's infidelity. Accordingly, it was easier for them to sever their emotional connections to the ex-husband and to start anew. Reasons for the divorces varied. One marriage came apart when the father, who objected to having children, started to drink heavily after his wife became pregnant. Another woman filed for divorce after the husband's careless driving caused a serious car accident that crippled their child. In another, the man became increasingly impotent. Despite the crisis of the divorce and the rejection by their wives, over half of the fathers in this group maintained frequent contact with their children. In part, this was due to the mother's ability to compartmentalize her feelings about the man from her understanding that the fathers and children needed one another. This ability enabled these mothers to actively facilitate the father–child relationship.

Overall, the women's second choice of husband or partner was more felicitous. By virtue of their education and job status, these women moved in social and professional circles where they had choices. Second husbands were affectionate, and the sexual life of the remarried couple was much improved over the former marriage. As remarried women, their financial situation was improved as well. Several stepfathers paid for the college education of their stepchildren. Mothers could afford long-term household help and were not overburdened. Only two women acquired step children.

Mothers in this group continued to care well for their children, although their relationships were more distant than during the first marriage, because of their time-consuming career commitments and the demands of the new marriage. The children's lives were enriched by good schools, including college and professional education. Over half of the fathers in this group maintained frequent contact with their children. Creating a remarried family was both easier and harder for the mother and children when the father continued to be an active parent. The peace of the household depended, in part, on the relationships between the father and the stepfather as well as between mother and stepmother. In several families, father and stepfather were competitive and the relationship of the two men remained a potential hot spot that required the mother's continual vigilance and sometimes exhausted her patience. All women in this group took this as a challenge and gave it their continual attention. As a result, there was little overt conflict

between fathers and stepfathers in this group and was there little conflict between stepfathers and mother's children from her first marriage. In fact, in most families, respect and even love developed between stepfathers and mother's children over the years. Only one stepfather brought his own children to the remarriage, and the mother adopted them and raised them as her own. Managing natural competitive feelings between mother and stepmother for the father's attention and resources and over the loyalty of the children also became part of the postdivorce parenting skill set of this group of mothers.

Another problem that arose in postdivorce parenting that had not been evident during the marriage was that fathers, and stepparents, sometimes found one child more attractive than the others and seemed to have few qualms in providing unequal attention and discrepant gifts. In one remarriage, the stepfather showered the appealing, outgoing adolescent stepdaughter with generous perks, including private college, while ignoring her shy, gifted brother, who was deeply hurt by being overlooked. Fearful of rocking the new marriage, the mother tried to protect her son by sending him away to school. He became successful in his career, but reported feeling abandoned by her. Discrepant attitudes toward siblings following divorce and its consequences for the children have been described in detail in an earlier publication (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2007). All of these challenges reshaped the mother's role, broadened her responsibilities and impacted her relationships within the family in ways that demanded continual awareness and tact.

Overall, the relationship between young adult children and these remarried mothers, while close and affectionate, did not contain the same intense attachment that we observed in families in which the mothers remained single. Children in this group grew to adulthood with many of the economic and parenting advantages that they would have enjoyed within a functioning, intact marriage. They benefited from consistent maternal attention and affection. Like the adult children in the first group, they were affectionate and respectful of their mother, but they did not feel as responsible for her well-being and they did not feel as needed by their mothers. Children from these remarried families maintained respect for their mothers, fathers and stepfathers through their sometimes rocky adolescent years and into their adulthood. Compared with the children in the other groups that emerge in this study, the young people in this group had the most protected childhood and adolescence and the widest opportunities.

Group B: Downturn in Parenting: Often Restored Years Later

Group B comprised 29% of the mothers, including 14 mothers and 36 children. Within this group were 5 women who suffered chronic, physical abuse during the marriage. Mothers in this group were younger at their divorce than the women in the preceding groups; their mean age at divorce was 31.3 years. Over half had married and had their first child in their late teens or early twenties. Several had quit school to marry or married at graduation when they were already pregnant. Six mothers had three or more children. The remainder (eight mothers) had two children each. Most of their children were school age (63%) and younger (26%) at the divorce. None of the women had established economic independence before their marriage. Only one had held a steady job prior to the divorce; only two had employable skills.

All but two of the divorces were sought by the wives. Close to half of the husbands strongly opposed the divorce. The separation was often stormy, as agitated husbands mounted dramatic, round-the-clock, campaigns to change their wives' mind. There were screaming matches and fist fights between men when the woman dated after the separation.

The women offered diverse reasons for the divorce, but agreed on their unhappiness of several years in duration. Those who had been pregnant and married out of high school considered the marriage a mistake from the start. They claimed to have grown up since the marriage, unlike their respective husbands, whom they regarded as irresponsible and childish. Most complained of the husband's drinking, drug habit, obsessive partying, womanizing, and increasing violence. One husband came out about his homosexuality. One woman concluded that her husband cared more for his dogs and his cars, whose photos he kept on his office desk, than he did for her and their children.

The women sought to reform their lives and to rebuild their intimate relationships at the same time that they undertook full-time school, special vocational training, and/or full-time work. In this group, mothers' time and emotional energy were redirected to these demands. Eventually, the emotional attachment between mother and child and the consistency of parenting were eroded. During these critical postdivorce years, many children described feeling overlooked, and this loss of parental connection and attention had consequences as the children entered the hazardous adolescent years. During the marriage, the women were devoted to providing a protected childhood for their children. They explained that they had sought to compensate for their own disappointment in the marriage and the disinterest or abuse of the fathers by investing in their roles as mothers and depending heavily on the love of their young children. As the women turned their attention to rebuilding their lives, the children experienced diminished attention, time, and care. Empty homes awaited them after school and during long weekends. One young woman, who had been 5 years old at the divorce, cried bitterly as she recalled, "Those were the loneliest years of my life. I had no one to talk to and no one to play with." Households, including mealtimes, were often plunged into disorder, as mother's attention shifted from care of the children to her work and social or educational pursuits and the oldest child, often a reluctant and resentful, young adolescent, or a 9-year-old, was placed in charge. Not surprisingly, some youngsters enforced discipline by threatening or slapping younger siblings. One mother sent her three children to reside with her abusive, alcoholic former husband when she remarried.

Typically, after an average of four or more years, most of these mothers regained their balance. They graduated from schools and training programs and found full-time jobs to their liking. All but two remarried. Several worked in businesses with their new husbands. Second husbands were older, and most had been married before. As households became better organized, and routines including family dinner were reestablished, most of the children regained their developmental progress, but at least one child in each family remained troubled. These long-term casualties included adolescents who continued to struggle with addictions to drugs, early sex, and alcohol. Girls on the cusp of adolescence were particularly vulnerable to their sudden loss of maternal supervision and direction. In explaining their sometimes frantic search for sexual contact, several explained: "It's not the sex. I just wanted to be held." Only a third of the fathers visited regularly and exercised a parental role.

In several families, the rapprochement between mother and adult child occurred years later, often after a serious crisis in which the mother undertook a successful rescue. One such dramatic rescue occurred when one child participant, now a young mother, arrived at midnight at her mother's home carrying her two young children, after having been beaten by her drunken husband. As the mother took the terrified daughter and grandchildren into her home, she recalled vividly how she and her children had left her violent husband many years earlier. The emotional impact on the grandmother of the duplication of that critical scene was overwhelming. The renewed closeness of grandmother, daughter,

and grandchildren enabled the young mother to return to school and to rebuild her chaotic life.

The five mothers in this group who had been physically abused for years and their children had an especially challenging road to recovery from the traumatic experiences and memories. In one marriage, the man's violence was a prologue to sex when he caught up with his fleeing wife. Both the beating and the subsequent rape were overheard and painfully and vividly remembered into adulthood by the terrified young children. In another family, the drunken father fired a gun at his wife while screaming accusations of her infidelity. The 4-year-old who witnessed this episode suffered with vivid nightmares, which intrusively recapitulated the scene of attempted murder, well into her thirties. Another young woman sought unsuccessfully for many years to suppress a terrifying memory of seeing her mother, on all fours, trying unsuccessfully to escape her husband's blows. These clinical reports are consistent with recent research on the profound impact of trauma on neurology and attachment (Lieberman, 2004; Lieberman & Van Horn, 1998).

Separation from abusive husbands was immediately beneficial to the women. They felt safer and proud of their difficult achievement. But the transition for the abused mothers seeking to regain their adulthood and their capacity to parent was a rocky road. These abused women needed several years to establish confidence in themselves as adults before they were able to recast their parenting. After the divorce, which was sought by the women, most of the fathers maintained their visits with their children. Most sought to restore the marriage by telling their children that their mother was incompetent and could not manage without their help. The women, in turn, had been emotionally tyrannized for years, controlled by husbands who told them regularly that they were stupid and childlike and needed a strong man to manage their lives. Men actively recruited their children to join in convincing their mothers to return to the marriage. Several children acquiesced and returned home to scold their anguished mother for seeking divorce. One father humiliated his preschool daughter during their visits with insults. After praising her brother extravagantly, he told the hapless child repeatedly, "You are stupid like your mother, like all women." Tragically when the child grew to adulthood, despite intelligence and beauty, she suffered from low self-esteem and was frequently hurt by abusive men. This transmission of intergenerational trauma has been well documented (Perez, 2009).

Gradually and painfully, mothers acquired confidence in their judgment and their authority. After several years of trial and error, they learned to make decisions, to handle their own finances, and to take an active parental role. They needed to acquire the strength to address serious problems with youngsters acting, such as a 17-year-old who hit his mother when frustrated, and boasted, "I am becoming just like my Dad; last week I slapped my girlfriend across her face." Mothers were often sick at heart and profoundly shaken but gradually were able to gain the love and respect of the youngsters who initially identified with their violent, powerful fathers. Sometimes the youngsters' reassessment of the mother occurred more quickly when they witnessed their father beating his second wife. It often took years for the children to recover from the multiple effects of the violence that they had witnessed, and for the mother−child relationship to heal. All of the abused women who remarried chose more stable men who brought a sense of respect and order into their homes. Several of the stepfathers in this group provided affection and encouragement to their stepchildren. One young man spoke lovingly of his stepfather: "My Dad is a loser" he said. "My step is my real father." These examples illustrate that repair is possible given a corrective emotional environment (Taylor, 2004; Appleyard & Osofsky, 2003).

Group C: Collapse in Maternal Parenting

Group C, which represented one quarter of the mothers in the study, included 12 women and 24 children. Their mean age was 35.1 years. More relevant is that this group contained women at both ends of the age spectrum, including two 18-year-olds who abandoned their children and five women over 40 who were the oldest in the study. Two of the mothers had three children each, eight had two children, and the remaining two mothers had one child each. Sixty-two percent of these children were school aged, 21% were adolescents, and 17% were age 5 or below.

These women were fragile in their psychological adjustment. During the marriage, they suffered with long-standing physical complaints and psychological difficulties, including alcoholism, severe depressions requiring periodic hospitalization, bipolar syndrome, and phobias that restricted their mobility and competence. The divorce and the demands of their new postdivorce role quickly sapped their capacity as parents. After the divorce, they struggled with mounting panic as they contemplated their future in which they foresaw increasing loneliness and poverty. None had realistic plans for how they would care for the children; all of whom had been left in their custody. Although some (42%) had worked part time during the marriage, only three were able to work at all after the divorce. Women over 40 were especially pessimistic about their future. Several deteriorated into helplessness and dilapidated condition. It appeared that the events surrounding the divorce precipitated a tragic breakdown and ushered in a lasting collapse in parenting, which was tragic for them and for the children. Sadly, they did not recover during the 25 years postdivorce. One mother committed suicide 10 years after the breakup. Half remarried or repartnered, mostly with unstable men. The second marriages had troubled histories.

The majority of these women had been able to function as parents prior to the divorce. They loved their children and were able to parent with competent hired help, and good psychiatric and medical care. The structure of the marriage and the financial stability provided order and continuity to the families' daily lives. Many had also enjoyed the support and affection of their respective husbands when they were young. One devoted young husband arranged his work so that he could remain at home and care for his two children during his wife's periodic hospital stays for her recurrent depressions. All of these resources disappeared after the divorce.

In half of these families, the mothers impulsively initiated the breakup without plans for their future or the future care of their children. Three mothers in this group ran off impulsively, leaving their children with the father, who was entirely unprepared for their care. In the remaining half of the families, the father initiated the divorce, usually without warning to his wife. One husband filed for divorce in a rage the day after his wife attempted suicide. None of the fathers requested custody of the children or extended visiting at the time of the divorce, although they were fully aware of their wife's serious difficulties. Two men disappeared. Although the majority of the men were high-earning professionals or businessmen, none of the divorce settlements provided funds for continued psychiatric treatment or domestic help in living arrangements for their former wives. Losing the structure of the marriage, which had been essential scaffolding for the quality of their parenting, and in the absence of any transitional support, this group of mothers could not sustain appropriate maternal attachment to their children or responsible parenting.

Adolescent children in most of these homes had to take on the major responsibility for personal care and later, financial care, of their mother. One alcoholic woman was cared for

by her youngest daughter, who spent her adolescence fetching her drunken mother from bars and street scenes. Over half of the mothers survived on child-support payments, or welfare, and on caregiving from their adolescent or grown children.

The personal lives of the children were dogged with serious problems. Promiscuity among the young women was a prominent symptom. Although many fathers continued to see their children and a few took them into their homes after they reached adolescence, there was no recognition by any father of the despair of the children as they watched their mother collapse. In only one family were grandparents attentive to their grandchildren's plight. Seven adolescents were eventually rescued by their fathers, with the new stepmother's encouragement. They were taken into their father's home and sent to college and professional schools. The remaining children led deprived and difficult lives. In essence, they raised themselves. Anger at their fathers ran high for their failure to intervene. As one young woman told us: "He had plenty when my mom and I were starving." Eleven of 24 youngsters dropped out of school early on, working at unskilled jobs, well below their abilities. All struggled with loss, unhealthy attachments, shame, and misery from being abandoned by fathers and helpless to rescue their ill mothers. Their passionate longing for the intact family of their early childhood continued full force. As adults, the photos several carried wherever they wandered were photos of the intact family, including themselves as young children. They were in continual mourning.

Discussion

This close look at mother−child relationships in an educated, middle-class, nonlitigating population during the 25-year aftermath to divorce has clinical as well as legal implications. The study shows that divorce is a gateway to major change in the lives of divorced women that reshaped the pattern of their daily lives and led to a continuum of responses. The low end of the range was filled with troubling and traumatic sequelae, and the upper range achieved enhanced changes in the mother−child relationships, as both mother and child adapted through resilience or adjustment, to the unforgiving, and largely unanticipated demands of the postdivorce environment. This unique analysis uses a long-range qualitative and quantitative view and captures the changes in parenting during the 25-year aftermath to divorce. The study provides a fuller and more accurate understanding of the totality of the divorce experience for mother and children along with a fuller explanation for the widely reported troubling outcomes for many children. The picture of divorce that emerges differs markedly from the view of divorce as a time limited crisis from which the resilient child and parent will soon recover if parental conflicts can be reasonably resolved or successfully mediated and the child is able to continue frequent contact with both parents. Instead, we report an extended period of transition and rebuilding during which mothers and children often struggle for years to gain or regain economic and emotional stability. Relationships between fathers and their children also showed many unanticipated lapses in contact after fathers' repartnering (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2009). We conclude that, after divorce, the family that the children experience is in many ways an entirely different family than the one they knew before, not only in its structure and the relationship between the parents, but also in the relationships available and emotional attachments and economic supports provided for the minor children by one or both of their parents.

Only half of the mothers in this study were able to maintain the nurturing relationships that they had created for their children during the failing marriage. They succeeded in combining responsible, sensitive rearing of their young children, along with full-time

work, and sole management of the household. Some did so by sacrificing their career opportunities and interest in remarriage or repartnering, giving total priority to care of their children. Others in this group were able to maintain their responsible parenting after successful remarriage, which provided financial and emotional supports, although it was sometimes marred by conflict between stepfathers and stepchildren and between visiting fathers and stepfathers, which demanded the women's continual vigilance to avoid disruption of the remarriage. In another one third of the divorced families, maternal availability and guidance were abruptly curtailed during four or many more critical years following the breakup, as women gave priority to finding suitable employment, to improving their marketable skills through training and education, to restoring their social network, and to their search to replace their intimate adult relationships. Although the majority of their children regained much of their earlier developmental progress when the family structure and the mother's availability were restored, one child in each of the families in which the children temporarily took a back seat in the attention of their mother continued to suffer from psychological difficulties and educational failures. Adolescent youngsters, especially those who entered adolescence during the critical years of the mothers' reduced availability, were caught up in drugs, alcohol, early sexual promiscuity, and school drop-out. These results are supported in subsequent research on risk-taking behavior in attachment disordered and or traumatized individuals (Perez, 2009). Finally, the most serious and most consequential drop in parenting occurred for one quarter of the women who had struggled for years with psychiatric symptoms, including depression and alcoholism. Parenting became untenable because the divorce settlements did not consider the crucial need for extended financial support for medical and psychological care and household help. As a result of this legal and humanitarian oversight, unprepared and suffering adolescents became long-term financial and emotional caregivers for their mothers. Lacking adult guidance and financial support from both parents, many youngsters struggled with poverty, serious psychological problems, and limited education. A small group was rescued by their remarried fathers, with the stepmothers' consent, after they reached adolescence, and were provided with a secure home and a good education. Women who had been abused during the marriage gradually succeeded over several years in taking responsibility for themselves and their children, and greatly improved in their ability to provide mature guidance for their children.

Our study shows the critical importance of the mothers' continual care and availability during the immediate postdivorce years for all children, but especially for adolescents and youngsters entering adolescence. Struggling with loneliness, anger, and confusion after the break up, their neediness rendered these youngsters highly susceptible to peer influence and seductive delinquent voices. Our earlier work has shown that, given the needs and demands of children of varying ages, the burdened, divorced mother is often more likely to give priority to attending to the younger children and to expect premature independence from young adolescents (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). Moreover, society has long been aware of the importance of consistent care and supervision of young children. Our study highlights the heightened needs of adolescents, especially young adolescent girls, for a mother's presence, during the immediate postdivorce years. This occurs at the same time that the mother experiences greater pressures and burdens. Our study also reports the enhanced difficulty of mothers and children in families with two or more siblings. It has been insufficiently recognized that the divorced mother who is responsible for the care and rearing of several minor children confronts a much more demanding, often exhausting postdivorce life, as we found, with little or no hands-on help from repartnered fathers or extended family members, including grandparents.

The women who benefited most from the divorce and were able to continue their competent parenting were those who sought the divorce, and who were able to remarry happily shortly after the breakup. These women entered the postdivorce life with marketable skills, including a history of working outside the home and, in most cases, had jobs that they enjoyed and that paid reasonably well. Their work also provided contact with adult men and women who helped them rebuild a new social network to replace the one they lost following the divorce, and often it was one in which they met their new spouse.

Findings from this study have implications for the agenda of the courts. It has become customary in many courts to request evaluation of the history and current quality of parent–child relationships in families litigating postdivorce living arrangements for minor children. The many changes in mother–child and father–child relationships that we report that followed both divorce and remarriage over many years lead us to question the value of these evaluations at the time of the breakup. Reliance on court-ordered evaluation is based on the implicit expectation that the quality of relationships evident at the breakup is likely to continue. Therefore the relationship visible at that time, it is assumed, can be used reliably for the court's decisions to protect the child's interests, including choice of custody. Although no one would dispute that it is critical for the court to investigate the presence of serious psychopathology in a parent or child and to make use of such findings to protect the child, our studies have showed that one half of the mother–child relationships and a significantly larger number of father–child relationships changed considerably during the postdivorce years in ways that were not evident or predictable at the divorce. Our data also showed major changes in parenting following remarriage and repartnering, which were unpredictable from observations during the breakup. The study also shines light on the complexity of the factors that reshaped postdivorce parenting, and the greater requirements placed on children to achieve earlier independence in divorced families. The divorced mother is required to reach deep into her emotional resources to find the energy, the will, and the courage to start anew to build her family. The history of the marriage and the factors that led to its demise are highly influential in her moods, her strengths, and her struggles. They remain influential in the attitude that she brings to building a new life, as well as in her view of men and remarriage, and the values that she consciously or unconsciously conveys to her children. Other influential factors in shaping the mother's parenting include the mother's age, educational and vocational resources, as well as her physical and emotional health. Whether the medical and psychiatric help available to her during the marriage was included in the divorce settlement is also important. Our study shows that, despite the financial ability of many of the husbands to pay for continued medical and psychological care, none was provided to help the women during the demanding years after the breakup. The number of the children in the mother's care is also a critical factor influencing her postdivorce adjustment and mothering.

This study also clearly shows that early attachment patterns are subject to change by later life experience. Although the capacity to parent is rooted initially in the dominant attachment patterns and identifications of the parent's own early experiences as an infant and growing child, in adulthood a host of additional social and psychological factors appear increasingly influential or determinative. In the stable marriage, parenting is refueled daily by marital love and sexual intimacy, by parental pillow talk, by the insistent presence of the children, and the ever-changing issues that parents are called on to address and resolve together. The absence of this continual reinforcement, which the functioning marriage provides, appears to have a major impact on the stability of many parent–child relationships, especially when competing with the divorced adult's powerful needs for sex, love, and companionship. It is also apparent in our study that remarriage or repart-

nering as well as divorce have a powerful capacity to change the mother−child relationship. Both solo parenting and parenting within a new relationship represent a different experience from parenting within a functioning marriage in their emotional demands, rewards, and support.

It appears that, like Pandora's box, our study opens a box filled with observations that call into question some of our long-accepted assumptions and point to special hazards during the postdivorce years. Thus, contrary to common belief, our findings are that many children were well raised and protected in marriages that were unhappy for one or both parents. Feeling dissatisfied with the marriage, many women chose to give even more priority to the care of their children. This protection seemed to work well, especially with young children. Many of the children in this study had happy childhoods and were academically and developmentally on target during the marriage that failed. Those who succeeded in adjusting to the changed demands of the postdivorce family and the reduced support from parents were required to become increasingly independent and emotionally more mature during the years that followed.

Also unexpected was the limited or absent hands-on help that the mothers received from fathers and extended family members, including grandparents, who often lived at a distance. Many courts have not been sympathetic to a mother's request to be allowed to return to reside near her family to make use of help that her extended family had indicated it was willing and able to provide. This study suggests that this policy should be reexamined, especially when the mother will be expected to parent two or more young children.

Finally, much of the emphasis in divorce counseling at the breakup is on resolving conflict between the parents. Although some accommodation between the parents is necessary to settle legal and financial issues, it surely would be helpful for parents to make use of the time prior to the final breakup, to prepare emotionally for the new chapter in their lives, and realistically to prepare for new responsibilities and portending changes in their relationships and available time with their children.

Study Limitations

Long-term longitudinal research such as this study, which spanned several decades, from the early 1970s to the end of the 20th century, provides a unique and valuable long-term perspective, and inevitably describes conditions that differ in important ways from the present. Unlike many of the women in the study, women today are better educated and prepared to enter a more hospitable marketplace and fewer are full-time homemakers. Nevertheless, given the recent economic downturns, the economic pressures on divorced women and men are likely to remain heavy, especially for parents with several children to raise and educate. Moreover, many married mothers with young children work part time today, and they are catapulted following divorce into finding full-time employment, along with long hours of day care for their children.

In accord with the law and social climate of the seventies, children in this study were legally in the sole custody of their mothers. Joint custody currently enjoys growing support. Unfortunately, there are few long-term studies of postdivorce mother−child relationships and even fewer studies of long-term outcomes of children raised in joint custody, or those raised before and after remarriage of one or both parents, which would enable proper comparison of outcomes among parents and children. The child outcomes reported in the one long-term qualitative study of children raised in mediated joint custody, described in the literature review, were not encouraging (Johnston et al., 2009).

Finally, because this is a qualitative study of a relatively small, relatively homogeneous, and, in some ways, privileged population, designed to generate hypotheses about the course of maternal parenting in the divorced family, the priority would be to test the incidence of these findings in large and diverse populations.

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