

Divorce still hurts

Two respected researchers have published studies on divorce's effect on children. Only one looked deep enough to see the pain.

by Glenn T. Stanton

You hear what sounds like an argument and repeated use of the word "divorce." Two people with much in common now see things very differently. Both are confident of their grasp of the truth and seem unwilling to accept the other's point of view.

So what is all the fuss about? A neighbor's troubled marriage?

Not at all. It's a debate between social researchers, or more accurately, the media portrayal of a debate about whether divorce has the severe impact most research has long shown—or whether divorce leads to a better life for children and their parents. The latest volley in this civil war among family scholars began with the release of E. Mavis Hetherington's *For Better or For Worse: Divorce Reconsidered* (Norton, 2002), which a front-page story in *USA Today* said reveals "the negative impact of divorce on both children and parents has been exaggerated."

Time magazine reports this "latest major study . . . contradicts the one before it, so who's right?"

Hetherington opens her book proclaiming it is "a new story about divorce."

But is it really? And a new story compared to what? To answer this, we must look at the recent history of divorce research.

California fault line

Our country's divorce revolution began in 1969 when then-California Gov. Ronald Reagan signed the world's first no-fault divorce law. And like the great land-grabbing pioneers who raced westward with the Homestead Act a century earlier, the no-fault divorce laws spread eastward in the 1970s and early '80s until every state adopted one.

SOLID RESEARCH, HANDS DOWN: Judith Wallerstein's decades-long study of divorce found it had traumatic effects on children. A rival researcher tried a different approach and got different results.



Sociologists were hopeful, assuming if adults could easily exchange bad marriages for good, we would have happier, more self-actualized adults who would parent happier, more self-actualized children. Like disco and leisure suits, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

This revolution provided researchers with a massive population sample to study, and they came to press in the late '80s and '90s with some startling findings. Large numbers of divorced adults were less secure, experienced failing physical and mental health, were unable to put their lives back together and entered affairs and cohabiting relationships that were just as troubled, if not more so, as the newly discarded marriage. Domestic violence increased dramatically. Some entered new marriages that broke up faster and as tragically as the previous ones.

Children fared even worse. Many of them described their childhoods as

ending the day their parents announced the divorce. Others described being "scarred" for life. They reported being crippled by anxiety, possessed by anger and disoriented by confusion and fear of abandonment. Their behavior, grades and physical and mental health suffered. They were different children. In fact, they didn't see themselves as children any longer. Divorce forced them to become adults, sometimes before they became teens.

And it wasn't just a handful of studies coming to these conclusions. These findings are found in mountains of academic studies.

Parallel tracks

One of the most impressive of these studies, and certainly the best known, is Judith Wallerstein's. She began studying 131 children of various ages as they experienced the divorce of their parents in the early 1970s and followed them

over 25 years. Her conclusion, set forth in *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study* (Hyperion, 2000), was that divorce was a deeply painful experience for children. They endured more depression, greater learning difficulties, more aggression toward parents and teachers and were two to three times more likely to be referred for psychological help at school than their peers from intact families. And to her surprise, Wallerstein found divorce took its greatest toll years later, in early adulthood.

While Hetherington's work is lauded as a new hopeful story on divorce, it is primarily Wallerstein's that is seen as the old hopeless one. Wallerstein and Hetherington are the Bill Gates and Steve Jobs of divorce research. It all started with them, and it is difficult to say who had the bigger impact.

For all the supposed differences between these scholars' findings, they are remarkably similar—personally, professionally and ideologically. Both women are psychologists who earned degrees from the University of California at Berkeley. They started their careers at roughly the same time, are in their mid 70s and are closing their careers with major books cataloging their work. Each has been married for 40-plus years (their husbands are professors), never divorced and both have married, never-divorced children. Both are grandmothers.

However, their research methods vary greatly. Wallerstein studied a smaller number of children but spent a lot of time with them. She visited them in their homes and got on the floor to play with them. She talked to them at length about their feelings and lives over 25 years. These children were people to her, not just research subjects.

Hetherington, by contrast, studied 2,500 children over 30 years, but she knew most of them as data on spreadsheets.

Both used highly respectable scientific methods. But Wallerstein looked deeply into a small group. Hetherington's scope was broader but shallower. Hetherington looked at adults and their children. Wallerstein focused primarily on children. This is one of the reasons Wallerstein's study is seen as more negative; she looked more deeply and more intimately into the hearts of divorce's greatest losers.

The 'new story'?

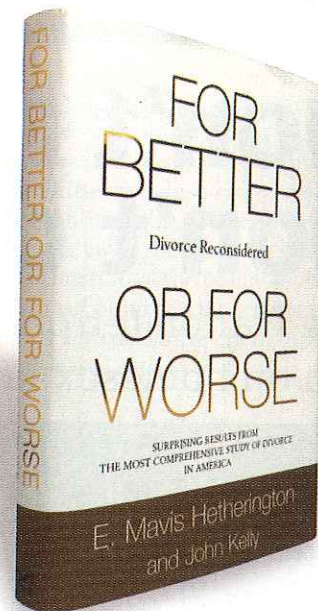
Given all the similarities in the researchers and the differences in their methods, what is the story on the research itself? Does Hetherington tell a new story on divorce?

"I am sorry the press is reporting a new day in our understanding of divorce, because it is not a new day. If you read the book and don't just use the press reports, [Hetherington] is finding a lot of things that coincide with my work," Wallerstein told *Citizen*. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, author of *The Divorce Culture* and co-director of the National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, agrees: "Hetherington's work does not tell a new story about divorce. It seems to coincide with what Wallerstein has found, that the consequences of divorce are deeper than we ever imagined they would be. And both studies correspond to the larger body of data on this question."

What the apparent difference comes down to is a "glass half full/glass half empty" interpretation of data. Hetherington boasts that 30 percent of the adults in her study had what she called "enhanced" post-divorce lives. Wallerstein believes that a finding of only 30 percent showing improvement after divorce is "not something to dance about." The largest group in Hetherington's study (40 percent) was the "good-enoughs," who didn't get worse or better after divorce but simply traded one set of problems for another. The other 30 percent of adults faced troubling issues after divorce.

As for the children, Hetherington explains, "At the end of my study, a fair number of my adult children of divorce described themselves as permanently 'scarred.'" Specifically, 25 percent of children from divorced families had what Hetherington called "serious social, emotional, or psychological problems." They were anxious, antisocial and lacked self-control. Only 10 percent of children from a control group of intact families displayed such problems. Hetherington also explains that one of the surest ways to avoid divorce is not to marry a child of divorce, so accordingly, children of divorce are not marital prospects.

So, is divorce a guaranteed ticket to ruin? Obviously it doesn't devastate everyone, but it does harm more than we



can be comfortable with. And it rarely brings benefits.

But divorce's real impact becomes clearer as we look at the larger population. As W. Bradford Wilcox, a research fellow at Yale University, observed, "Most of the media coverage of [Hetherington's] book misses the forest of divorce's social impact for the trees of divorce's impact on the average child." Wilcox explains: "About a million children experience divorce each year—using her calculations of the effect that divorce has on children—[and] that means about 250,000 children annually will experience severe psychological distress into adulthood."

Even if divorce does not devastate all the lives it touches, Wilcox concludes, "divorce is an environmental disaster for the social environment . . . making a large minority of citizens miserable and casting a cloud over all marriages."

So, the apparent feud between divorce researchers is more media creation than reality. Any difference is more the result of an interpretation of the data, rather than a major difference in the data itself. The world of divorce scholars is a happier home than we are led to believe. It is certainly happier than the one divorce is able to create for children and their parents. ●

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