The Impact of Parental Marital Status on Intimate Relationships Across Ethnicity: A Review

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Abstract
With divorce being so prevalent, researchers have focused on the possible negative effects for the children involved. The majority of this research has only focused on the effects of divorce in Caucasian American individuals. Specifically, there is sparse research that examines the relationship quality of the children of divorced parents in various minority ethnic groups. The author chose to review the relevant literature by focusing on the connections between the variables of divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality, with the intent to develop a comprehensive understanding and critical review of the intersection of all three variables (how divorce affects relationship quality across ethnicity). The review found that, due to conflicting information, more research is needed to come to a conclusion of whether divorce negatively affects intimate relationship quality across ethnicity.

Degree Type
Thesis

Degree Name
Master of Science in Psychology

Committee Chair
Jane Tram, Ph.D.

Subject Categories
Psychiatry and Psychology

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THE IMPACT OF PARENTAL MARITAL STATUS ON INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS ETHNICITY:

A REVIEW

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

OF

SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

HILLSBORO, OREGON

BY

JOSHUA TABALDO

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY

JULY, 22, 2009

APPROVED: _______________________________

JANE M. TRAM, PH.D.
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ABSTRACT

With divorce being so prevalent, researchers have focused on the possible negative effects for the children involved. The majority of this research has only focused on the effects of divorce in Caucasian American individuals. Specifically, there is sparse research that examines the relationship quality of the children of divorced parents in various minority ethnic groups. The author chose to review the relevant literature by focusing on the connections between the variables of divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality, with the intent to develop a comprehensive understanding and critical review of the intersection of all three variables (how divorce affects relationship quality across ethnicity). The review found that, due to conflicting information, more research is needed to come to a conclusion of whether divorce negatively affects intimate relationship quality across ethnicity.

Key terms: Divorce, Ethnicity, Relationship Quality, Acculturation
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research would not have been possible without the support and effort of many, including my family and research group. I would like to express special thanks and gratitude to my wife, Crystal Tabaldo, and my thesis advisor, Dr. Jane M. Tram. I would also like to thank my fellow students and research team members James Maxson, B.A., Forrest Merril, M.S., and Rebecca Dodge, B.A.
The Impact of Parental Marital Status on Intimate Relationships Across Ethnicities: A Review

Divorce is no longer a rarity. With the divorce rate being as high as 3.6 divorces per 1,000 marriages, most North American individuals know someone who is divorced or is from a divorced family (US Census Bureau, 2005). This higher rate of divorce demonstrates that the nature and structure of the family is changing. The “traditional” nuclear family of two parents and approximately two children has become less common. Step parents, half siblings, single parent households, and other numerous combinations of family structures add to the newfound complexity of family structure. While this change in family structure is not necessarily positive or negative, numerous aspects that include family context, child characteristics, and extra-familial contexts, such as culture or socioeconomic status complicate the child’s outcome from divorce (Cummings & Davies, 2002).

Purpose

Since the research (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Kelly & Emery, 2003) exploring the positive and negative effects of divorce on Caucasian American individuals has been contradictory and the research (e.g., Lopez, Melendez, & Rice, 2000) examining divorce across various ethnicities is sparse, the effects of divorce across ethnicities would also likely be as, if not more, nebulous. The first purpose of this study is to review the relevant research by examining three main variables related to this topic: divorce,
ethnicity, and relationship quality. The second purpose of this study is to review relevant literature that examines how those three variables interact with one another (i.e., how divorce varies across ethnicities, how relationships vary by ethnicity, and how relationships are affected by divorce). The third and final purpose of this study is to examine the overall intersection of the three variables. Thus, in order to understand how divorce affects relationship quality across different ethnicities, the review will investigate the connections between the variables so that future researchers can more thoroughly understand the effects of divorce in families of ethnicities other than Caucasian American families. It is important to note that the discussion of ethnic groups deals with culture and in this review, culture will be framed along the collectivism and individualism continuum.

Overall, the main purpose of this review is to obtain a better understanding of the impact of parental divorce on intimate heterosexual relationship quality in individuals who are not Caucasian. This will be accomplished by exploring the interconnections between divorce, ethnicity, and intimate relationship quality. The remainder of the review will first address the three variables—divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality—individually. The review will next focus on the pair-wise interactions of the three variables and then, discuss research on how divorce affects relationship quality across different ethnicities. Finally, the review will end with closing thoughts, a summary, and suggestions for future research directions.

Divorce

Divorce, defined as the legal separation of one’s parents, is one of the key variables in this review and will be examined in this section. Divorce may disrupt the
child’s environment in numerous ways (Cummings & Davies, 2002; Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001). Amato and Keith (1991) found achievement, adjustment, and well-being to be lower in children from divorced families compared to children from intact families. Subsequent research (Amato, 2001) has found this gap between children from divorced families and intact families to have grown. However, research has shown various effects depending on gender (e.g., females having larger negative effects than males; Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Strohschein, 2005; Amato & Keith, 1991) and age of the child when the parental divorce occurred (e.g., with younger children having larger negative effects than older children; Allison & Furstenberg, 1989). The effects of divorce also vary depending on the level of conflict and nurturance provided to the child pre-divorce and post-divorce. For example, those who experienced more conflict and less nurturance before and after the divorce exhibited more maladjustment (Portes, Howell, Brown, Eichenberger, & Mas, 1992). According to Kerig (1995), families with conflict and divorce may have a disruption of family cohesion.

However, in some cases, marital divorce and a reduction in related conflict reduces the child’s distress, which serves as a constructive protective factor (Cummings & Davies, 2002). It appears that in those situations, eliminating the high amount of stress and conflict in a home through a parental divorce benefits the child despite the emotional distress associated with the divorce or separation of the parents and the subsequent changes in family structure. Children whose families continue to have family rituals after a divorce tend to have reduced maladjustment (Portes et al., 1992), suggesting that reducing the amount of change that occurs during a divorce can benefit the children. Amato (2000) noted some of the mechanisms through which divorce affects individuals.
These possible modes of how divorce affects individuals included parent-child relationships, continuing discord between former spouses, loss of emotional support, economic hardship, and an increase in the number of other negative life events. Amato (2000) also noted protective factors that moderate the speed and extent of adaptive adjustment. These protective factors included education, employment, and support from a new partner, being the spouse who initiated the divorce, active coping skills, support from family and friends, and having access to therapeutic interventions for children. Addressing differences across ethnicities further complicates the changing complexity of relationships throughout a child’s development after divorce.

In research concerning divorce, it is vital to have a group of individuals who have parents that have remained married as a comparison group. This is because much of the research (e.g., Nicholson, 2006) has examined the effects of divorce without having a comparison group. Given that excluding research without comparison groups would increase the sparseness of research reviewed, this review will include research regardless of whether comparison groups were utilized. By including those studies that may have faulty designs or incomplete controls, information can be considered and integrated with the research that has more empirically sound designs.

Another important point is that the research examined in this review fails to account for same-sex couples, primarily because the term divorce assumes that a couple can become married. Due to same-sex marriage not being legal in most states, sparse research has included same-sex couples in divorce studies. Research by Gottman (1989) noted that most of the social adjustment problems in children were usually related to divorce rather than whether the parents were a heterosexual or same-sex dyad. Since
same-sex marriage is not legal in most of the United States and is not legally recognized on the federal level, it would be useful to examine countries that have legalized same-sex marriage. A study by Frisch and Hviid (2006) examined childhood family correlates of heterosexual and same-sex marriages in Denmark. Future research, either in other countries or in the United States—pending same-sex marriage or civil union legalization—should include these samples to make the results and conclusions more generalizable to different populations.

Ethnicity

Ethnicity, defined as one’s identified ethnic group or groups, is one of the major aspects of this review. Ethnicity will be further discussed throughout this section by examining the difference between ethnicity and race, describing the continuum of collectivism and individualism, and considering multiculturalism. Ethnicity and culture impact one’s life in various ways depending on one’s ethnic identification and acculturation to the dominant culture (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). Where one stands on the collectivism-individualism spectrum can affect how that person views the world, how that person copes with life stressors, and the types of relationships that person has (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001).

*Ethnicity vs. race*

Ethnicity is rooted in culture and social groups, while race can be defined in numerous ways. While occasionally rooted in genetic or biological categorization, race is more a physical categorization serving as a social construct (Smedley & Smedley, 2005). Thus, race, for the purposes of this review, will be defined as physical differences that are
categorized into groups. Ethnicity will be defined as the cultural and social differences that are categorized into groups.

By these definitions, one would be multiethnic by having a blend of cultural influences that encompass language, religion, and behavior. For this review, ethnicity will focus on African, Latino, and Caucasian American groupings. These ethnic groups include differences in language, culture, and possibly religion. The concept of race plays a role in ethnicity as well due to a conceptual overlap between race and ethnicity. For instance, someone who identifies as African American and has African American features could be categorized as an African American person racially and ethnically. Conversely, if a person outwardly has more African American features, but identifies with Latino American culture, then that individual’s race would be distinct from the person’s ethnicity.

Collectivism-Individualism

The continuum of collectivism and individualism encompasses values, norms, goals, and behaviors. Collectivist cultures tend to stress the importance of group goals more than individual goals, whereas individualist cultures tend to stress self-determination, pursuit of self-interest, and self-actualization more than community. One can be high in collectivism and individualism without contradiction. Different social contexts can have a unique level of collectivism or individualism for an individual. For example, one may behave in one manner with one friend and in a different manner with another friend. Similarly, one may behave in a more individualistic manner with friends and in a more collectivist manner with one’s family. Many minority groups are high in collectivism and low in individualism when compared to Caucasian American individuals.
Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). For example, if one is a Caucasian person, one may identify as more individualist. If one is a Latino American or an Asian American individual, then one tends to be more collectivist. Yet, if one is an African American person, then one tends have a higher degree of individualism and collectivism. Coon and Kemmelmeier posit that the high degree of individualism and collectivism observed in African American individuals could be due to a possible survival mechanism to cope with exclusion from the dominant society. However, this theory would not explain the different pattern seen in people that are Latino American or Asian American. Some researchers (Gaines et al., 1997) have found that there are no differences on individualism among minority groups and Caucasian American individuals. This finding may be due to acculturation level, which will be examined later. Overall, these categories of collectivist and individualist may broadly apply to different cultures, but the individuals composing that culture may identify themselves to be at any point along the spectrum.

It is important to note that this review does not differentiate between the level of collectivism that is typically seen in a Latino American person and that of a Latino individual living outside of the United States since the review focuses on the experience of Latino American individuals. However, there could be large differences between the two groups due to acculturation. Future research into acculturation may focus on the acculturation level variation and the relationship with effects of divorce.

**Multiculturalism**

If one is multicultural—that is, he or she identifies as having more than one culture—then the mixture of the different cultures can result in countless variations of
how one views his or her environment (Phinney, 1992) and, as mentioned earlier, one can have a collectivist view in one situation and be more individualist in another. For example, a Latino American person who normally identifies as collectivist plays on a sports team that is structured around an individualist framework. Or along cultural lines, one may identify as more a Caucasian American person with friends and more a Latino American person with family although they are equally as much Caucasian American as they are Latino American. The acculturative stress of existing within two or more different cultures may create conflict within one’s life (Caplan, 2007). However, multiculturalism can serve some benefit, such as increasing imaginative creativity compared to those people from only one culture (Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008). Being multicultural also appears to have varying effects on family relationships. Caucasian females may have less interaction or contact with mothers and fathers than multicultural females. Multicultural males may have lower relationship quality with fathers than single culture males (Radina & Cooney, 2000). This finding may be due to multicultural males being more emotionally vulnerable than other males (Cooney & Radina, 2000) combined with fathers being less comfortable than mothers in dealing with negative emotions (Leadbeater, Blatt, & Quinlan, 1995) resulting in a strain on the father-son relationship.

Among clinical samples, many multicultural individuals suffered from difficulty forming their ethnic identity. However, those from the nonclinical population were not found to be unhappy or uncomfortable with their ethnic identity (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). It should be noted that in this review, various ethnicities will be broadly categorized into larger ethnic groups. There are boundless differences within ethnic groups. For example,
Asian American individuals may be further broken into individuals that are Japanese American, Chinese American, Korean American, or another Asian American subgroup. Even among those categories, the groupings can be further sorted into groups that have various ideals, levels of collectivism and individualism, family dynamics, and religious practices. Further research on the intricacies of the various groups should be addressed to explore differences and similarities.

One possible conflict for those who identify as multicultural is having different and competing cultural norms. This can occur when two cultures that an individual identifies with have opposing values. One example of such differing cultural norms is expectations for marriage. Thus, it is possible to belong to a culture that allows for divorce, while at the same time belong to another culture that strongly discourages divorce. Religion, which will be examined later, may be a source of a conflict for those who recognize and identify with their multiculturalism.

Relationship quality

Relationship quality, defined as one’s perceived satisfaction with their relationship, is a key variable that this review will be examined in this section. In particular, how relationship quality is affected by divorce across ethnicities will be explored. The divorce of one’s parents has the possibility of paralleling one’s relationship with future partners (Amato & Booth, 1997). One’s relationship with one’s family (e.g., one’s parents and siblings, if applicable) would also be expected to be impacted by divorce since dynamics and interactions within the family change. The purpose of this review will focus on intimate relationships, but will reference other types of relationships, such as parental and sibling, to further understand the possible impact of a divorce.
As mentioned earlier, same-sex and other sexual minority relationships will not be included in this study due to limited research with this population. Another reason to restrict the review to heterosexual couples is to focus on the effects of divorce on heterosexual intimate relationships as a means to decrease the amount of variability in the samples included in studies. If same-sex and heterosexual relationships were included in the analysis, then the effects of divorce—positive or negative—could be attributed to the difference in sexual orientation. By focusing on the variable of sexual orientation, the functioning of the individual after a divorce may be attributed to the effects of the divorce itself, rather than other confounding variables. The focus on heterosexual relationships will allow the current review to generalize only to heterosexual relationships. Based on the literature reviewed, the majority of studies are only able to generalize to individuals that identify as a heterosexual Caucasian American person because researchers have used mainly heterosexual Caucasian American participants in their studies. Because the majority of research contains heterosexual Caucasian American participants, this review will also be able to only generalize to that population; however, the integration of information about different ethnic groups may suggest whether the findings of research about Caucasian American participants will also generalize across ethnicity. In order to generalize the results of research with heterosexual participants to same-sex relationships, the same questions raised in this review should be addressed in future research in which sexual orientation is also part of the purpose of the critical analysis of the literature. For example, future research can address how parental separation affects one’s own intimate relationships depending on the sexual orientation of one’s parents. Of course, the term
parent would have to be further defined to differentiate between biological, adoptive, or another personal definition of parent.

The remainder of this investigation of the current literature review will address various combinations of the divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality to demonstrate how the interaction between the pair-wise combinations of variables may impact past research findings. This will occur before addressing the combination of all three variables of divorce, ethnicity, and intimate relationship quality. Examining the variables in this fashion facilitates exploration and further understanding of the connections between the variables and where the body of research is lacking.

Divorce and Ethnicity

The relationship between how divorce varies across ethnicity is explored in this section. First, rates of divorce are shown to illustrate the difference between the ethnic groups. The remainder of this section explores possible causes for the varying divorce rates, such as religion, which will be examined more thoroughly than the other possible causes such as education level, unemployment, and socioeconomic status.

Rates of divorce

Examining how divorce varies across ethnicities, there are disproportionate rates of divorce for different ethnic groups. According to the US Census Bureau (2004), Caucasian American individuals have a divorce rate of 23.3% for men and 25.4% for women. Individuals who are African American have a divorce rate of 19.1% for men and 19.6% for women. Asian American individuals have a divorce rate of 7.3% for men and 10% for women. Latino American individuals have a divorce rate of 11.2% for men and 14.6% for women.
The rates of divorce do not describe the nature of the couples’ relationship quality since a divorce could be either amicable or negative. The divorce rates also do not depict the likelihood that an individual from any particular ethnicity has of experiencing a divorce. However, the rates do provide information concerning marriages that did not have a desired amount of satisfaction. However, according to Bramlett and Mosher (2002), African American women are more likely to experience marital disruption in their first marriage and less likely to remarry than other ethnic groups. These differences in divorce rates demonstrate a gap between the different ethnicities and warrant further exploration into the possible causes as well as possible effects of such discrepancies. Noticing the differences will allow researchers to begin to theorize about the factors that may contribute to ethnic discrepancies.

**Possible causes of ethnic differences**

Research has identified a number of factors that contribute to the observed ethnic differences in divorce rates, with religion being a factor that will be highlighted in this review (e.g., Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Nef, Gilbert, & Hoppe, 1991). Philips and Sweeney identified education level, whether or not a couple had premarital sex, age when one marries, nativity status, and religious involvement as factors that separate ethnic group differences in divorce rates. According to Bramlett and Mosher, unemployment, incarceration, mortality, and experiences as children of unmarried or less-educated parents also contribute to the divorce rate disparity. Nef and colleagues identified socioeconomic status, marital history, and nature of marital complaints as having a role in the disproportionate divorce rates. There are numerous potential causes that may interact with each other to contribute to the differences in
divorce rates across ethnic groups. However, only religion will be examined in this review.

The Nef et al. (1991) study should be interpreted with caution because of the methodology that they employed. Their sample was obtained by examining surnames from divorce petitions and determining whether or not the surname appeared to be Spanish. This methodology can be problematic since multiple non-Spanish ethnicities have stereotypical Spanish surnames. For example, individuals of Caribbean or Filipino ethnicities may also have Lopez as a last name. Thus, it is likely that their sample includes individuals who are not Latino individuals. Another limiting aspect of this approach is that the use of stereotypical Spanish surnames may exclude those who are Latino but do not have the author-defined Spanish surnames. One last criticism of the article is that the study did not specify the surnames that they used. Without information regarding the surnames used, readers can neither understand what the authors defined as Spanish surnames nor replicate the study.

Religion

Nef et al. (1991) found that socioeconomic status plays a negative role in differing divorce rates across ethnic groups. Since Latino individuals on average have lower socioeconomic status than Caucasian and African American individuals (U.S. Census Bureau, 1999), one might expect Latino individuals to have a higher divorce rate than Caucasian and African American individuals. In contrast, Latino individuals have a lower divorce rate than Caucasian and African American individuals (US Census Bureau, 2004). One reason proposed for this discrepancy is the relation between Latino culture and Catholicism which may contribute to the preservation of marriage quality and
stability (Bulanda & Brown, 2006). For example, individuals of Mexican descent have identified with Catholicism to such a degree that Catholicism has become a large aspect of Mexican culture (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). Although other ethnic groups may also have large proportions of individuals that identify as Catholic, only Latino American individuals will be emphasized for the purposes of this review.

It is possible that religion serves as a buffer to divorce. While various religious institutions understand the prohibition of divorce may not be logical or healthy, Orthodox Judaism, Protestant, Islamic, and Catholic religions have allowed for its members to divorce. Yet the level of acceptance, overt and covert, that people of divorce experience varies (Kaslow, 1991). When spouses attend church regularly, the couple has the lowest risk of divorce (Call & Heaton, 1997). However, this finding does not suggest that religion serves as a buffer against divorce, but rather that having similar values between the spouses decreases risk of divorce. This theory is supported by Call and Heaton’s (1997) findings that differences in church attendance increases the risk of dissolution of marriage. Marks (2005) also found that religious participation is correlated with higher marital commitment and increased family satisfaction. However, there may be a self-selection bias as most religions are marriage and family oriented.

Despite the evidence that religious involvement can serve as a buffer for divorce, there are some cases when religious involvement can serve as a challenge in marriage (Marks, 2005). For example, when faith involvement, such as going on missions, separates couples for extended periods, families can become strained. Another possibility is that couples may experience a conflict of religious values or beliefs when they are members of different religions. Parental relationships can also be damaged if one
converts to a faith different than their parents’ faith. If a person marries someone from another faith, there may be an inter-faith conflict between the individuals.

Since the majority of Latino American individuals identify as Catholic, shared religion and spirituality could serve as a large protective factor against divorce (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008). However, it is important to note that because a married couple chooses not to divorce does not signify that they have a high degree of relationship quality or relationship satisfaction. In some cases, it is possible that not being able to divorce due to religious affiliation may create more relationship and individual distress due to a feeling of being trapped.

The research demonstrates some variability in the degree of adjustment after a divorce (e.g., Kitson, 1992; Neff & Schluter, 1993). While Kitson (1992) reports that African American participants adjusted to divorce more readily than Caucasian American participants, no differences were found across ethnicity for depression (Neff & Schluter, 1993) or happiness (Aldous & Ganey, 1999). With the lack of extensive research and conflicting research findings, the nature of differences or similarities in research findings concerning divorce adjustment cannot be concluded.

Summary

Although individuals that are Caucasian American have a higher divorce rate than other ethnicities, African American individuals may be more apt to divorce than other ethnicities (US Census Bureau, 2004). The differing rates in divorce and likelihood of divorce may stem from countless aspects, as well as affected by countless more (e.g., Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Nef, Gilbert, & Hoppe, 1991). Religion affiliation, which is largely seen in Latino American individuals, may play a
large role in enhancing marital quality by decreasing the extent of the negative effects of divorce as well as decreasing the likelihood of divorce (Bulanda & Brown, 2006).

Divorce and Relationships

The impact of divorce on one’s relationships will be discussed in this section. First, the section focuses on how divorce may affect relationships with parents, then sibling relationships, and then intimate relationships.

Parental effects

Divorce can affect one’s relationships, beyond one’s romantic and sexual relationships, in various ways. Divorce can have numerous effects on one’s relationship with parents. The relationship with the father may deteriorate, while the relationship with the mother may improve, which may be related to pre-divorce marital conflict, post-divorce living arrangements, and parental remarriage (Frank, 2007). In Frank’s study, participants consisted of fathers that tended to remarry, leaving their children to rely more on their mothers for emotional and practical needs as compared to the children’s father.

Sibling effects

Similar to the conflicting results of other areas of divorce research, studies on the effect of divorce on siblings’ relationships vary (e.g., Frank, 2007; Abbey & Dallos, 2004). While Frank (2007) noted that siblings’ relationships were not affected by marital status, conflict, or age at the time of parental separation, Abbey and Dallos (2004) found that siblings’ relationships strengthened as a result of the parental divorce. MacKinnon (1989) found that sibling dyads with an older male (i.e., older male and either a younger male or younger female) were more negative and resistant and less compliant with parents than dyads with an older female (i.e., older female and either a younger male or
younger female). The author hypothesized that the dyads with an older male and younger female might be mirroring the husband and wife structure and modeling the negative interactions that he or she may have previously witnessed.

Despite the effect on the relationship between the siblings, merely having a sibling can act as a buffer for stress (Caya & Liem, 1998) and reduce the amount of externalizing behavior (Kempton, Armistead, Wierson, & Forehand, 1991). Kurdek (1988) found that older siblings were better adjusted than their younger counterparts. Divorce can even affect one’s own identity development and stunt his or her development (Mullis, Mullis, Schwartz, Pease, & Shriner, 2007).

**Intimate relationships effects**

Specifically examining one’s intimate relationships, previous research (Cherlin, et al., 1991) noted that emotional difficulties that may occur for people with divorced parents can be attributed to pre-divorce marital conflict. Later investigation explored how there are also lingering effects of the parental divorce that affect individuals into their twenties and thirties (Cherlin, Chase-Lansdale, & McRae, 1998). These lingering effects vary, but could involve dysfunction in one’s own intimate relationships.

These lasting effects of parental divorce into adulthood can negatively affect intimate relationships through an intergenerational transmission, which is the transfer of marital qualities across generations, for factors such as marital quality and satisfaction (Amato & Booth, 1997). However, it is important to note that the presence of a divorce does not necessarily indicate that there was a high degree of marital conflict. In fact, marital conflict, rather than parental divorce, is associated with offspring conflict behavior (Cui, Finchman, & Pasley, 2008). It appears that conflict in marriage can
transfer to the children of divorce. If marital conflict is able to transfer to children, one could wonder whether the likelihood of going through a divorce could also be transferred to the children of divorce. Such would be an example of Amato and Booth’s (1997) intergenerational transmission.

The type of observed conflict resolution with one’s mother or sibling, whether it is negative or positive, has been found to impact and influence one’s later interpersonal and romantic conflict resolution (Reese-Weber & Kahn, 2005). A third of the 93 interviewees from divorced families in a 25-year-long follow-up study found that participants were openly pessimistic about marriage and divorce for themselves and tried to avoid marriage and divorce (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). The study claimed that “parental divorce impacts detrimentally the capacity to love and to be loved within a lasting, committed relationship” (p. 363). However, the authors then note that 60% of the women and 40% of the men have been able to establish “reasonably gratifying and enduring relationships” (p. 363). Of the groups that have had trouble in relationships, some have had reasonably harmonious relationships, yet still had fears of commitment and difficulty in resolving conflicts in intimate relationships.

The Wallerstein and Lewis (2004) study encourages the exploration of the long-term effects of divorce and provides an avenue for further research in order to add support to the claim in the article that individuals with divorced parents have poorer intimate relationships as they reach adulthood compared to individuals with parents that remain married. However, the Wallerstein and Lewis study has a number of flaws. First, the authors failed to use standardized and objective measures. They also conducted few statistical analyses to determine whether differences between their groups were
significant. These methodological concerns decrease the ability of the study to be replicated. Secondly, the authors failed to provide a figure for the number of people within each condition group (e.g., the number of participants who were in the condition that had trouble in relationships). Without information about the number of participants in each group, generalizability of the participants’ statements about divorce cannot be determined for each group. For example, specific information about the proportion of people experiencing difficulty in relationships can provide a more honest and realistic perspective of the rate of intimate relationship dissatisfaction occurring in the general population. Kelly and Emery (2003) reported that 75 to 80% of children and young adults do not suffer from major psychological issues and that research attending to only those individuals with problems may create an unrealistic idea of the actual proportion of those troubled by a parental divorce. Contrary to previous evidence (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004), those from divorced families are not distinguishable from those with married parents in the long term. Kelly and Emery also noted that there are children from married families experiencing severe psychological, social, and academic difficulties as well as children from divorced families that are functioning well in such domains. The authors note that divorce is one of many aspects that help determine the long-term outcome of children from divorced families. Amato (1999) even noted that approximately 42% of young adults from divorced households had well-being scores at or above the average of scores from young adults with parents that were still married.

Summary

Despite the conflicting research on the impact of divorce on individuals’ relationships (e.g., Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Kelly & Emery, 2003), the research by
Wallerstein and Lewis demonstrate that divorce can negatively affect people into adulthood. Although divorce does not negatively affect all children (Kelly & Emery, 2003), those that are negatively affected may have transferred interaction styles from their parents through the intergenerational transmission (Amato & Booth, 1997) or have a bias against marriage due to their observation of their parents’ unsuccessful marriage (Wallerstein & Lewis). Though the research does not conclude how often divorce negatively affects people, the research (e.g., Amato, 1999) does note that divorce can have a negative effect. Understanding the differences and causes between positive and negative outcome of parental divorce could make a negative outcome less likely.

Ethnicity and Relationships

The interaction between relationships and ethnicity is an interesting one for researchers. This section focuses on how relationships can vary across different ethnicities. The section first examines structural and then cultural differences in the Latino American population. The roles of acculturation, parenting practices, and sibling relationships in the Latino American population are further explored in this section. The Latino American population is the focal point of ethnicity for this review because there is a large base of research discussing culture in comparison to those that identify as Caucasian Americans.

One’s relationships can be greatly impacted by one’s ethnicity. Examining primarily Latino American individuals and their relationships, as mentioned before, due to the availability of research for Latino American individuals and lack of research for other ethnicities, the ethnic differences in relationships could be part of either structural or cultural differences between ethnicities. For example, researchers have described what
is called “the paradox of Mexican American nuptiality” (Oropesa, Lichter, & Anderson, 1994, p. 890) as having a mix of these two differences. The paradox of nuptiality is where individuals that are Mexican American and African American have similar experiences of economic disadvantage, but Mexican American people resemble Caucasian American individuals more in their family formation behaviors, such as having higher rates of marriage, more positive attitudes about marriage, and lower rates of divorce than African American individuals (Bulanda & Brown, 2007).

Structural differences

Structural differences are the economic factors that can affect the level of stress in a household throughout the entirety of marriage. The role of economics plays varying roles with different ethnicities. While education and employment does not have a salient role in Mexican American divorce (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005), low levels of socioeconomic status among the same group, particularly Mexican immigrants, have a lower risk of divorce (Bean et al., 1996). Wilson (1987) noted that the relatively low proportions of marriages in African American individuals is due to men not having stable earnings or being a viable mate. Financial issues appear to be fairly important for the marital quality of African American individuals (Orbuch et al., 1996). As for Caucasian American individuals, since economic instability may weaken marriages and Caucasian American individuals are typically born into wealthier family systems (Casper & Bianchi, 2002), have more education (Stroops, 2004), and have higher incomes (Fronczek, 2005), they would be expected to have stronger marriages than Mexican and African American individuals. Though there are differences in economic level, there appears to be more aspects influencing relationships across ethnicities since African American individuals
and Mexican American individuals have similar economic disadvantage, but nevertheless have different rates of divorce.

**Cultural differences**

Cultural differences appear to be at least one other influence on marriage. There is an importance of family in Mexican American families and the role the collectivist culture might be part of the paradox of nuptiality (Oropesa et al., 1994). Family cohesion waxes and wanes throughout one’s development and the Mexican American participants oriented toward Mexican culture in a study by Baer and Schmitz (2007) had a significant increase in family cohesion during mid-adolescence. This is perhaps due to the development of the adolescent and the family attempting to prepare the adolescent’s transition into adulthood. The difference between the two Mexican American groups from the Baer and Schmitz study illustrates the role of acculturation level since the group oriented towards the Mexican culture had differences in family cohesion, but the group oriented towards the American culture demonstrated no differences with Caucasian participants. Thus, acculturation level or amount of identification to certain cultures influences family cohesion.

**Impact of acculturation**

The variation stemming from different levels of acculturation has been shown to play a role in relationships (e.g., Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2008). For example, Smokowski and colleagues (2008) noted increased cohesion in families with bicultural identification compared to monocultural families. As previously discussed with multiculturalism, the level of acculturation affects how one interacts with others. Since acculturation level is in relation to the dominant culture, it does not fully address the role
of the minority culture. It appears that those who have involvement with one’s culture of origin and some biculturalism have a positive influence on family dynamics, such as cohesion and adaptability (Smokowski et al., 2008). Interestingly, there appears to be a higher degree of importance of family among those who identify strongly with Mexican as well as American culture (Rodriquez, Mira, Paez, & Myers, 2007).

However, the greater level of acculturation gap between the parent and child can cause conflicts between fathers and their children, but not for mothers and their children (Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008). Schofield and colleagues stated this could be due to mothers being more involved in their children’s lives than fathers. Therefore, any disagreement created by differences in acculturation could be more salient to the children. As discussed earlier, an individual that is less acculturated to the Caucasian American culture and identifies more with their collectivist culture will have more family cohesion in mid-adolescence (Baer & Schmitz, 2007). It appears that while being multicultural may increase family cohesion, conflict can be caused from the acculturative stress (Caplan, 2007) or differences between generations (Schofield et al., 2008). Despite these differences, relationships tend to vary in cohesion according to one’s culture.

Parenting practices

Parenting practices also tend vary across ethnicities with Mexican American parents showing more verbalizations of control than Mexican parents, and more verbalizations of lack of warmth and acceptance than Caucasian American parents. Mexican American parents also displayed a decrease in anxiety as compared to Caucasian American and Mexican parents (Luis, Varela, & Moore, 2008). This effect might be due to Mexican American parents making the collective needs of the family
more important than the needs of individual family members, thus making the family a more cohesive unit. An alternative explanation is that Mexican American children expect more control from their parents than the other two groups. The results of this study show how the role of culture and acculturation play in how one interacts with others. The combination of individualistic and collectivistic cultures may have a role in the results of the study. What effect these findings have on one’s future development is unknown and not commented on by the researchers. However, it might be theorized that the parenting practices, through the intergenerational transmission discussed by Amato and Booth (1997), are transferred to the children as they incorporate the same parenting practices with their own children or other people they interact with.

Sibling Relationships

Sibling relationships are also related to culture as the Latino concept of familism plays a role not only in sibling relationships, but in the entire family unit. This concept is a key feature in the Latino culture, but more specifically with individuals that identify as Mexican Americans (Marín & Marín, 1991). The Latino construct of familism emphasizes family support and loyalty; however, sisters displayed a stronger pattern of association than brothers (Updegraff, McHale, Whiteman, Thayer, & Delgado, 2005). Updegraff et al.’s finding that Latino sisters share closer relationships than Latino brothers may be accounted for by the finding that daughters provide more assistance to their families than sons (Valenzuela, 1999). Furthermore, Latino families protect their daughters more than their sons by restricting and monitoring non-home activities, which results in more of an emphasis on home life for daughters (Azmitia & Brown, 2005). This pattern could lead to more cohesion and endorsed familism among sisters rather than
brothers. However, it is unknown if the relationships between Latino siblings are necessarily stronger than the relationships of Caucasian siblings. Siblings that identify with the familism of Latino culture would conceptually have closer bonds than those who do not. As mentioned earlier, having a sibling can act as a buffer to divorce (Caya & Liem, 1998). With this information combined with the familism concept, it is possible that having a sibling and being Latino may be a stronger buffer against divorce as compared to having a sibling and being a Caucasian individual or a Latino only child.

Summary

One’s ethnicity can affect one’s relationships because cultural influences and differences impact the amount of individualism and collectivism one identifies with (Baer & Schmitz, 2007). Relationships in a collectivist culture, such as Latino culture, may produce more support and cohesion than relationships (either intimate, parental, or sibling) in an individualist culture, such as American culture (Updegraff et al., 2005). Of course, this is a broad generalization that does not portray the variation that occurs in the Caucasian and Latino cultures. Certain concepts, such as family, are more emphasized in collectivist cultures, while other individual ideals are emphasized in individualist cultures (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). These differences in parenting practices or the various family relationships seem to be due to cultural factors and economic factors (Oropesa et al., 1994).

Divorce, Ethnicity, and Relationships

The last section examines three studies (Lopez et al., 2000; Davis, 2006; Nicholson, 2006) that illustrate the interaction between all three variables, or, more
specifically, how one’s parental marital status affects one’s relationships across ethnicities.

With the lack of research that has combined divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality none of the studies have specifically explored intimate relationships across ethnicities. One study examined parent-child bonds and adult attachment across the three ethnic groups of people who identified as African American, Latino American, and Caucasian American (Lopez et al., 2000). While attachment relates to and provides information about intimate relationships, it does not completely address relationship quality or satisfaction.

Lopez and colleagues (2000) surveyed 487 undergraduates and asked them to complete three measures: A demographic questionnaire, the Adult Attachment Questionnaire, and the Parental Bonding Instrument. Although the authors found that those from divorced families regarded their family relationships as less warm and cohesive, they found no evidence of a significant effect of parental marital status on the measures of adult attachment orientation. However, parental bonds accounted for over twice the variance in adult attachment anxiety among students from divorced families compared to peers from intact families demonstrating the importance of one’s bond with his or her parents and how that affects attachment anxiety across parental marital status.

Latino and African American participants in the Lopez et al. (2000) study reported a greater attachment related avoidance in intimate relationships than their Caucasian counterparts. This may be due to numerous reasons. First off, this finding may be due to the campus consisting of predominately Caucasian American students and ethnic minority students being more cautious and hesitant to form relationships. Cultural
factors may be partially at fault for the finding as well. As mentioned earlier, ethnic minority participants that identified with more collectivist culture may have more difficulty being separated from their family. However, this would not account for the African American participants from previous research who tended to have a higher degree of individualism and collectivism (Coon & Kemmelmeier, 2001). It is possible that the African American participants relied more on their collectivist ideals when in a new environment. Perhaps the collectivist reasoning may apply more for the Latino American participants and the racial minority status may be a more appropriate reasoning for the African American participants.

It is important to note that the level of pre-divorce and post-divorce conflict and parental remarriage are not controlled for in this study (Lopez et al., 2000), which make the conclusions being drawn more conservative. The level of conflict is a large confounding factor that may account for the effects. As mentioned before, pre-divorce conflict is an important aspect to control because the effects separating people from divorced families from those from intact families may be due to the conflict rather than the divorce itself.

There are some studies that show support for differences between those from divorced families and those from intact families (e.g., Davis, 2006; Nicholson, 2006). A dissertation by Davis examined the role of parental divorce of 191 undergraduate African American participants on their ability to form satisfying adult romantic relationships and on their socioeconomic status. The author found sparse adverse effects of divorce on the ability to form healthy adult intimate relationships and satisfaction with their
relationships. The study examined primarily African American women, so the results cannot generalize to African American men.

Unfortunately, no Caucasian individuals or other ethnic groups were used and thus, no strong conclusions can be made comparing adult intimate relationships across ethnicities. However, this information can provide evidence that there may be an ethnic difference in how divorce affects intimate relationships. It may be that the amount of collectivism helps protect against intimate relational dysfunction and dissatisfaction by having closer bonds with family and friends.

Findings from Nicholson’s (2006) dissertation suggest that there are no differences in martial attitudes in African American individuals and Latino American individuals from either intact or divorced families. The participants in Nicholson’s study consisted of 35 college student participants completing measures of parent-child relationship (e.g., for relationship with the father and for the relationship with the mother), self esteem, and marital attitudes. The author found interesting results. Nicholson found that intact families had better father-child relationships than divorced families. However, there were no differences of mother-child relationships across parental marital status. Of course, marital attitudes are not the same as relationship quality; however, understanding one’s views on marriage can provide insight into the quality of the intimate relationship. It is likely that those with low marital attitudes have lower intimate relationships quality.

As for differences across ethnicity in the Nicholson (2006) dissertation, African American participants had more positive attitudes toward marriage than Latino American participants. This result is partially contrary to the higher rates of divorce for African
American individuals (US Census Bureau, 2004). It would help to further investigate the potential reasons for the result that African American participants have more positive attitudes about marriage, whereas the Latino American participants thought more negatively about divorce.

The conflicting findings in Nicholson (2006) may be due to the small sample size and unequal groups. For example, there was a third more (7 more) Latino American participants than African American participants. It may be that there were not enough African American participants to find an effect or that the sample was biased since the participants were from an undergraduate university and more likely to have a higher socioeconomic status and higher education than other members of their ethnicities. Once again, the results of this study did not include a sample of Caucasian American participants to compare with and thus the research was unable to make stronger conclusions.

However, it is important to note that the previous two studies (Davis, 2006; Nicholson, 2006) are dissertations, not peer-reviewed articles. Due to the paucity of research showing the intersection of the divorce, ethnicity, and intimate relationships, any information should be presented, but, as with any study, should be interpreted with care.

None of the three studies showing some intersection of, divorce, ethnicity, and intimate relationships measured level of acculturation of the various ethnicities (Lopez et al., 2000; Davis, 2006; Nicholson, 2006). Examining the level of acculturation, by either having acculturation as a key variable in the study or controlling for it, would help make stronger conclusions in the research. Nevertheless, research not addressing acculturation provides great information about the effects of divorce as well as laying the foundation
for future research to see if the conclusions of research with the Caucasian population generalize to other ethnicities.

Summary

With the information reviewed from the literature, this concluding section will summarize the information presented in this review before attempting to answer the question of whether one’s parental marital status has an effect on one’s intimate relationships across different ethnicities. Finally, potential future research directions are discussed. These may help further answer researchers’ understanding of how a parental divorce negatively affects one’s intimate relationships across different ethnicity as well as expand upon the current research.

Based on the research that considers various ethnicities, there is conflicting research on how one’s relationships are impacted by the divorce of one’s parents (e.g., Davis, 2006; Lopez et al., 2000). Numerous aspects, such as culture and religion, may influence the differing rates of divorce across ethnic groups (Phillips & Sweeney, 2005; Bramlett & Mosher, 2002; Nef, Gilbert, & Hoppe, 1991). Although people who are Caucasian Americans have a higher divorce rate than other ethnicities, people who are African Americans may be more likely to divorce than other ethnicities (US Census Bureau, 2004). The differing rates of divorce and likelihood of divorce may be caused by countless aspects and influenced by countless more (Amato, 2000). Culture and religion may play a large role in decreasing the extent of the negative effects of divorce or even decreasing the likelihood of divorce (Smokowski, et al., 2008; Call & Heaton, 1997). For Caucasian American individuals, the research is conflicted as to how parental divorce affects individuals’ intimate relationships later in life (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004; Kelly
Despite this, it is apparent that there are cases in which divorce negatively affects people and continues to have an adverse influence into adulthood. Although this is not the case for everyone, it is important to understand the potential negative effects divorce can have on individuals and find ways to mitigate this potential outcome.

Since culture (i.e., amount of individualism or collectivism) and divorce impact one’s relationships (i.e., whether intimate, parental, or sibling relationships), it would seem logical that with cultural changes, there might be changes in how divorce affects one’s relationships. However, this hypothesis is not fully supported by the current research. While research by Davis (2006) and Nicholas (2006) revealed no differences across parental marital status in forming intimate relationships, research by Lopez and colleagues (2000) found variation in adult attachment, which is conceptually related to relationship quality. There appears to be some cross-ethnic variation amongst these three studies, though not all variation was statistically significant.

**Conclusion**

Unfortunately, the sparse research (Lopez et al., 2000; Davis, 2006; Nicholson, 2006) that has examined how parental divorce negatively affects intimate relationships across ethnicity cannot definitively answer whether parental divorce negatively impacts one’s relationships. Overall, it appears that parental divorce can have negative effects on intimate relationships across ethnicities. Exploring research findings with Caucasian participants, there appears to be some negative effects of divorce on the children of divorce (e.g., Amato & Keith, 1991; Amato, 2001; Allison & Furstenberg, 1989; Strohschein, 2005), although some researchers (Kelly & Emery, 2003) mention that
articles are misrepresenting the results and leaving out those children that positively adapt after a parental divorce. As these children grow into adulthood, their views on marriage may continue to be negatively affected (Wallerstein & Lewis, 2004). Sparse research has examined the generalizability of the negative effects of parental divorce with other ethnicities. The research that exists (e.g., Davis, 2006; Nicolson, 2006; Lopez et al., 2000) has yet to show any definite results that neither supports nor denies the negative effects of parental divorce across ethnicities. Assuming that the ethnic minority groups used in these studies had similar levels of acculturation as compared to the Caucasian group due to similarities in level of education, it would be expected that their findings would resemble the negative effects seen in Caucasian populations. Unfortunately, none of the studies addressing divorce, ethnicity, and relationship quality took acculturation level into account. These studies may have included samples of African American participants or Latino American participants that may have been highly acculturated into mainstream Caucasian American culture and thus were not representative of the rest of their ethnic group. If there are any negative effects of divorce, what those effects are and the extent to which they affect people have yet to be determined.

Future research

There are several directions for future research. A primary future research direction would be testing the generalizability of the theory of the negative effects of divorce. While the chief concern of this review is on diverse ethnicities, other diversity considerations should also be investigated. For example, examining the inclusion of same-sex divorced parents as well as same-sex intimate relationships would be a fruitful and important line of research. Understanding any possible differences or similarities
could help provide new material for more research and could possibly dispute stereotypes involving same-sex relationships.

Having smaller and more precise ethnic grouping in future research could improve generalizability. Since the current research categorizes ethnicities into broad groupings—like Latino American individuals, African American individuals, Asian American individuals, and Caucasian American individuals—within-group variation is largely ignored. Within the group of Latino American people are numerous smaller ethnic groups (e.g., Cuban American individuals, Mexican American individuals, Brazilian American individuals, Panamanian American individuals, Ecuadorian American individuals, etc.) that lose their uniqueness by being collapsed into a broad category. Completing research with the broader ethnic groups will help lead to more research with smaller ethnic groupings. It is possible that the broader ethnic groups may be causing the conflicting results due to large variation within those broad ethnic groups. By accounting for the smaller ethnic groups, the possible confounding variability within the broader ethnicities can be further explained. Furthermore, the research finding would then be generalizable to those smaller ethnic groups.

Future studies should control or at least assess for acculturation level across ethnicities. Instead of grouping participants based on ethnicities, it may be more beneficial to categorize based on level of acculturation. Because a person identifies as either Latino American, African American, or such forth does not culturally distinguish them from people that identify as Caucasian Americans. Understanding acculturation allows the researcher to make stronger conclusions. Conducting small studies that see if the previous research can generalize to the various broad ethnic groups (e.g., Latino
American, African American, Asian American, Native American, etc.) is central to the hypothesis of the negative effects of divorce. Although it is hypothesized that with acculturation factors controlled, research would generalize, research needs to test that hypothesis to support that argument.

Overall, there are many areas for future research into the question of whether or not parental marital status has a negative effect on one’s own intimate relationship quality across ethnic groups. There are also future research directions that can expand upon the question explored in this study regarding whether parental divorce negatively affects one’s own intimate relationships across ethnic groups as divorce and its effects on the individual continue to be a large feature of those living in the United States. Examples include incorporating same-sex intimate relationships and controlling for acculturation.


