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The Causes of Divorce/Separation and its Effects on Children, Women and Men

Austrian Research Project

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Aims

The study aims to answer questions concerning

- the causes of divorce/separation,
- the (mid-term) consequences of divorce/separation for children, women and men, and their adaption to the situation several years after divorce/separation,
- the ways children, women and men cope with divorce/separation,
- the relationships between children and parents after divorce/separation,
- resulting conclusions and recommendations for policy-makers.

Design

Our theoretical approach concerning the causes of divorce/separation is based on decision theory; for the explanation of the consequences of divorce/separation a stress-theory model was developed.

The design of the study includes various disciplines (sociology, psychology, therapy, economy, law) and the following empirical approaches:

- interviews with families who experienced divorce about 3-5 years ago
(40 in-depth interviews with the following family members: the divorced/separated mother, father and their children aged 9-14)¹
- 16 interviews with experts dealing with divorce/separation in practice
- secondary analysis of socio-economic data
- analysis of the legal situation.

The results of this project shall serve as a basis for recommendations to policy-makers, especially for developing measures against negative effects of divorce/separation.

Some main results

In contrary to the public opinion that the decision for divorce/separation is nowadays often a spontaneous one, our results indicate that this decision is the result of a long process. Especially partners with children only make this decision after careful consideration. The

¹ The interviews with families as well as those with experts were made in two regions of Austria, one city (Vienna, with high infrastructural standards and a high divorce rate) and one rural area (socio-economically disadvantaged, with a low divorce rate).

initiators for a divorce/separation are in most cases women. Usually men are surprised when their wives tell them that they want to get divorced.

The socio-economic analysis makes clear that the risk of getting divorced is lower for persons in rural areas, for families with children younger than six years, for families with a high household income, and for families with a low personal income of the wife.

Reasons for the breakdown of the partnership are (in the perspectives of the former couple): unfulfilled emotional needs, different attitudes towards gender roles (especially concerning work distribution within the family and responsibility of fathers), diverse educational and pedagogical principles, communication problems, absence of dyadic coping and conflict solving strategies, different priorities regarding spare time and family time, strong professional engagement and long workdays of men. From the female perspective, alcohol abuse was problematic, whereas men estimate sexual problems as a source of conflict.

Our data indicate that persons living in small rural communities have considerably worse chances to overcome difficulties related to divorce than townspeople. This is the case for children, women, and men. Reasons for this phenomenon are: fewer workplaces, child care centres and professional support; more traditional attitudes towards family, gender roles and divorce, a higher extent of social control, a bigger loss of social prestige after divorce, and less possibilities (and willingness) to require help.

“The” divorce does not exist. Divorce is different for children, women and men in how they experience the process and how they cope with the situation afterwards. Different members of the same family can make varying experiences. The question who is part of the family after divorce is answered in various ways by the different family members – a factor which makes it difficult to develop a common family-identity after divorce. Parents often cannot estimate correctly how their children cope with divorce, they tend to estimate children’s well-being better than the children themselves.

The financial situation of divorced women is noticeably worse than those of divorced men (household net income). The reasons are manifold: lower educational attainments, worse job opportunities, consequences of traditional gender roles during the marriage, and difficulties in the reconciliation of family and working life.

Women have another way of coping with the consequences of divorce/separation, and more active strategies to adapt to their “new” life, than their ex-partners. They have more effective

social networks and are more willing to require help from professionals. They also seem to use their experience in another way than men: in their new partnerships (which they estimate as very supportive) women are – in their own perception – quite successful in avoiding the mistakes they made in their divorced relationship. On the contrary, men accredit only a short-term support to their new partnerships, which after several time seems to resemble the former one.

The ways children cope with divorce and the strategies they use depend on different factors. Moderating variables are:

- A trusting, supportive and stable relationship with both parents
- The feeling to be loved by the noncustodial parent, and to play an important role in his (her) life. This is linked with regular contact with the noncustodial parent and the possibility to spend time with him (her) alone.
- Parents' ability to communicate with each other, to reach agreements, and not to devalue the ex-partner.
- Supportive siblings, grand-parents and friends.
- Sufficient and child-adequate information on the divorce and how it will affect children's daily life.
- Possibilities to participate in decisions about their living arrangements after their parents separate (e.g. contact with the noncustodial parent).
- New partners who don't influence the relationship between children and biological parents in a negative way.

Publications:

Final report (in German):

Zartler Ulrike, Wilk Liselotte, Kränzl-Nagl Renate (2002): Ursachen und Folgen von Scheidung/Trennung für Kinder, Frauen und Männer. Vienna: European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research.

Book publication, spring 2004 (in German):

Zartler Ulrike, Wilk Liselotte, Kränzl-Nagl Renate (forthcoming): Wenn die Eltern sich trennen. Wie Kinder, Frauen und Männer Scheidung erleben Männern. Campus.

Several articles (also in English) are planned.