

Children and Marriage : a conceptual review



Education

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Dr. Avinash De Sousa

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ABSTRACT

This is a conceptual clinical review that looks at the effect of children on marriage. It looks at various ways in which children affect a marriage. The presence or absence of children, the parent child relationship, the presence of a disabled or handicapped child, gender and number of children involved, quality time spent with the children, employment of the parents, age of the children and stage of the family life cycle and parenting approaches used are all analyzed. Not many longitudinal studies involving large sample sizes are available that address many of the issues needed. The review combines an evidence base with the clinical experience of the author and posits a non biased view of how children may positively or negatively affect marital stability. Children many a times are appositive influence on the marriage and may delay divorce but the presence of children may need adjustments on various fronts from both partners and this may lead to marital quality decline and interpersonal problems.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between children and marriage is a complex one in which bidirectional relations need to be emphasized. Although this means that marriages affect children and that children affect marriages, the central focus of this review is on the latter phenomenon. When we consider how children affect marriage, two contrasting views are evident. From a positive perspective, children are seen to derive from the love that spouses feel for one another and, as a result, to function as a source of joint pleasure and satisfaction that feeds back to enhance the marital relationship. The negative view conceives children as a source of stress and strain in the marriage, a barrier to intimacy, and a cause of conflict, thereby engendering disenchantment if not outright discord. Although Christensen (1968) commented more than 20 years ago that the positive view "is part of our folklore," the large numbers of couples who today choose childlessness as a way of life certainly suggest that our folklore may be changing. In fact, the research reviewed in this chapter indicates that the contemporary negative view of children is more accurate. We discover repeatedly that children's presence and marital quality tend to be inversely related.

It is unfortunately the case that existing research has more to say about what the "effects" of children are on a marriage than it does about the processes that give rise to such effects. Few studies reveal *how* children influence marriages, and there is virtually no evidence that such effects are part of a dynamic system whereby marriage and children are reciprocally interrelated. Many of the findings reviewed here derive from studies whose results are based on treating children, or some proxy of them (e.g., family size), as the independent variable and some index of the marriage (e.g., divorce, discord, satisfaction) as the dependent variable. To fail to recognize that what occurs within the parent-child relationship often mediates such correlational associations is to forget the fact that many spouses are also parents and that it is via the parental role that children influence marriages. In all too many cases, however, child effects are inferred from comparisons of spouses with and without children and of families in which children vary in age.

THE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ON MARITAL STABILITY

It was reported nearly a century ago that the presence of children may reduce the risk of divorce in a family, as indicated by evidence linking childlessness with increased marital instability. In fact, more than a decade ago Cherlin (1977) observed that "the most widely accepted position now is that divorce and separation are moderately lower for those who have children than for the childless." In this section we first review evidence that substantiates this claim and then consider processes that might account for the findings. Even though there is an abundance of evidence linking the presence of children, particularly young children

and perhaps even the number of children, with reduced risk of divorce, the data just reviewed provide little insight into the processes that might explain such findings. Before considering several possibilities, we must first entertain the prospect that the association between children and marital stability is an artifact of some third variable rather than any true effect of children *per se*. In this regard, Waite et al. (1985) observed that perhaps characteristics of individuals—such as strong taste for family life or religious beliefs—simultaneously increase the chances of parenthood and decrease the chances of separation or divorce without any direct effect of having children or remaining married. Perhaps those with the most stable marriages are more willing to have children for that reason,

Obviously, controlling for differences between divorced and non-divorced individuals on demographic variables such as age, education, and years married does not provide assurance that the kinds of processes implied in this assessment of alternative explanations of the children-marriage stability linkage have been taken into account. It seems inappropriate, therefore, to dismiss the very real possibility that the associations reflect selection biases (to have or not have children and to remain married or to get divorced) rather than actual effects of children on marriage.

Explanatory Mechanisms

Assuming that the linkage between children and marital stability is not an artifact of self-selection, how might the results reviewed earlier be explained? One possibility is that children enhance the quality of a marriage and thereby decrease the probability of its dissolution. However appealing this account might be, we see in the next section that, if anything, the evidence suggests just the opposite. Other explanations of the effect of children on marital stability emphasize barriers to divorce, and one such impediment is the perceived effect of divorce on the children themselves. It is undoubtedly the case that many relationships that would otherwise dissolve remain intact "for the sake of the children. Cherlin (1977) and others contend that economic factors are principally responsible for the effect of children on marital stability being restricted to the early childhood years, as this is the period when child care is most labor intensive and thus expensive. That is, young children prevent dissolution "not because they build new bonds between parents but rather because early child care may be too expensive and time-consuming for one spouse to manage alone".

Although there are few grounds for doubting economic explanations of the effect of children on marital stability, there is also no reason to regard the two explanations considered above as mutually exclusive. Indeed, under different economic conditions of

families and psychological conditions of parents, it is likely that these two forces play different roles. And, since some couples do separate even when their children are very young, neither of the processes considered above should be regarded as insurmountable barriers to divorce by parents with young children. Moreover, given the concerns for self-selection raised earlier, it cannot be concluded that young children cause—in the strict scientific sense of the word—their parents to stay married. At best, under still unspecified conditions, children seem to delay the eventual marital dissolution of some couples.

THE EFFECTS OF CHILDREN ON MARITAL QUALITY

The largest body of evidence pertaining to the effects of children on marriage derives from the study of the family cycle conducted principally by family sociologists. The most common focus of this body of research has been on marital satisfaction, defined in terms of subjective feelings of happiness, satisfaction, and pleasure experienced by a spouse when considering all current aspects of the marriage. Marital satisfaction is assessed routinely with self-report measures such as the Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959), the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976), or some other instrument that is usually validated by virtue of its association with such standardized measures.

The conceptual basis of research on marital satisfaction across the family life cycle is found in the writings of family development theorists, who contend that transitions in family roles of any one member foster the emergence of new family stages and can impinge on all the other role relationships in the family, including the marital union. What makes stages different according to these theorists are the distinct role demands that they place on family members and the different patterns of family interaction that they engender. Entry of the child into the family, for example, is thought to affect marriage if only because parenthood and marriage are in competition for finite resources: "from birth of the [first] child to the time the last child leaves home, parental roles compete with marital roles for temporal and emotional priority".

For the most part, family development models define stages in terms of the developmental status of either the oldest or youngest child in the family. Whereas the oldest child serves to demarcate the transition to parenthood, to school, and to adolescence, the youngest child serves as the marker for the empty nest, the stage when the last child has left home. It is as a result of the operationalization of stages in terms of children's developmental status that research on marital quality across the family life cycle can be examined from the perspective of the effects of children, particularly at different ages, on marriage. To be emphasized in considering the research reviewed here is that although most studies conceive of the child as exerting an indirect influence on the marriage, this presumed mediating path is seldom examined. In some cases, evidence is provided that illuminates processes of influence, and such data are considered only after examining the findings of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

The assumption of family-stage theorists that family life-cycle stages reflect changing roles of family members in response to childrearing demands, leads to the interpretation that changes in marriage associated with the stages are in some way a function of children's developmental status. Because of the way in which much of the data considered were gathered and analyzed, two alternative explanations of the evidence are possible, one of which still underscores the effect of children on marriage.

Presence versus absence of children

One possibility is that family stages merely reflect effects of presence (versus absence) of children, which, with rare exception, has been found to be related to lower marital happiness or satisfac-

tion. In keeping with this argument, it has been reported that when the predictive power of presence/absence of children was compared to that of life-cycle stages, presence/absence of children turned out to be a somewhat stronger correlate of marital satisfaction, inclination to contemplate divorce, companionship with spouse, and sense that spouse understood respondent. Pertinent to this discussion is research on childlessness. In a large cross-sectional sample, Renee (1970) found that couples raising children tended to be less satisfied with their marriages than were childless couples or those whose children were grown and had left home. In all cases, however, voluntary childlessness was not distinguished from postponing parenthood or involuntary childlessness. Moreover, these studies did not control for relevant confounding variables (e.g., education, labor force participation, religious affiliation) that relate systematically not only to childlessness but to marital satisfaction as well.

Still unclear, however, is whether children make marriages less cohesive and couples less happy or whether individuals in the most cohesive and happy relationships choose to forego bearing and rearing children.

YEARS OF MARRIAGE

Much of the effect of the life cycle, at least the downward trend in the purported curvilinear pattern, may simply be a result of the fact that over time marriages become less satisfactory. Indeed, when plotted, marital satisfaction in terms of years of marriage, it was discovered that satisfaction declined precipitously through the first 10 years of marriage and then increased over the next 15 years—a pattern mirroring the curvilinear pattern he discerned for both marital satisfaction and companionship.

Transition to Parenthood

In reviewing the literature on marital change across the transition to parenthood, it is useful to distinguish marital activities and interactions from more subjective feelings and attitudes regarding one's spouse and the marital relationship. The same strategy is adopted here.

Activities and interactions - Recent longitudinal studies indicate that the frequency, nature, and/or quality of marital interactions changes in the transition to parenthood. Noteworthy, too, is that these findings emerged in observational as well as self-report data.

In regard to negative interactions, conflict between spouses has been found to increase from the last trimester of pregnancy through the 9th postpartum month. It has been discovered that although the occurrence of conflict increases for those experiencing the transition to parenthood, frequency of conflict actually decreases for those who do not become parents.

Subjective feelings and attitudes - In view of these changes in marital activities and interactions, it seems reasonable to expect that the feelings that a husband and wife have for each other and for their marriage should also be affected by the experience of becoming parents. A majority of studies using prepartum and postpartum marital measures reveal that marital satisfaction declines after the birth of the first child.

Transition to Adolescence

The physiological maturation that accompanies and helps to define the period of adolescence is associated with increases in parent-child distance, adolescent autonomy, and parent-child conflict and may affect the marital dyad. In addition, adolescents' increased involvement in social relations outside the family, including relationships with opposite-sex peers, also

may affect parents' marital satisfaction by provoking concerns regarding the quality of the marital relationship, fantasies or reminiscences about alternative marital partners, or arguments over issues regarding the adolescent's social life. However, when the transition to adolescence coincided with entry of the youngest child into school, significant declines in perceived equity in the marriage emerged, accompanied by marginally significant declines in affection, even after controlling for gender of adolescent, number of children, education, and income.

Transition to Empty Nest

Cross-sectional research on marital relations across the family life cycle identified the period of the empty nest as one of elevated marital satisfaction. This is consistent with studies showing that this phase of life is marked by high levels of life satisfaction and personal happiness. In light of this, there is reason to expect longitudinal research to reveal that marriages improve in the empty nest stage relative to early periods of the family life cycle.

Cross-sectional and longitudinal data regarding the effect of firstborn children on marriage indicate that positive interactions between spouses and marital satisfaction decrease, particularly for wives, and that conflict increases. It is important to emphasize that the changes are modest and are generally in the same direction as those that typically ensue with the mere passage of time.

The question of whether adolescence actually represents a low point in the marital life cycle, as some cross-sectional evidence suggests, remains unanswered. Data suggest clearly that significant deterioration in the marriage occurs when the transition to parenthood coincides with other developmental changes among children in the family, this one study is too modest in scope to permit strong conclusions. Moreover, the conclusion it draws regarding multiple transitions is presumably not unique to adolescence.

Childrearing Disagreements

Throughout childhood parents are forced to make many decisions regarding their offspring that offer ample opportunity for disagreement and conflict between spouses. To the extent that couples have difficulty resolving such disagreements, children may serve inadvertently to undermine marital quality. Entirely consistent with this argument is the discovery that couples who disagreed more on childrearing attitudes and values when their children were preschoolers were significantly more likely to be divorced a decade later.

Consideration of the role of parental disagreements over childrearing should again alert us to the problem of self-selection and the difficulty of drawing causal inferences. That is, couples for whom communication is problematic to begin with may well be most likely to experience conflict over issues pertaining to childrearing. It might thus be better to view children less as a cause of marital conflict and more as stimuli that promote the manifestation of latent or preexisting communication difficulties. Thus, by providing some couples with another topic on which to disagree, children may contribute to the deterioration of marital relations.

Division of Labor

Another potential source of conflict concerns division of household labor. There is some evidence that coincident with the arrival of children is the traditionalization of family roles, a situation that is a source of serious concern for many wives. Data suggesting that family roles become more traditional take on added meaning in light of related evidence linking division of labor to marital satisfaction. Most noteworthy, perhaps, is the finding that household division of labor and satisfaction with division of labor are important mediators of the relationship

between children's presence and lower marital happiness in the case of women. Husbands also can be influenced by the division of labor, as men who did more feminine chores and house tasks early in the infant's first year in one study reported lower marital adjustment and more marital difficulties stemming from adjustment to the baby.

Psychological Well-Being

The presence of children is related not only to lower levels of marital satisfaction but also to less psychological well-being. A comprehensive review concluded that the presence of children appears to be associated with lower levels of happiness and satisfaction and with higher levels of psychological distress for both women and men. Of special interest is the fact that whereas the effects of children seem more negative for women, and the differences in well-being of parents and nonparents appear to be relatively small. Because at least two surveys indicate that psychological distress is greater among wives when husbands do not assist with housework, it seems necessary to reconsider the role of division of labor to understand the process by which children affect marriage. Conceivably, by traditionalizing the division of labor, children could increase wives' psychological distress and thereby exert an adverse impact on marital relations. Of course, this is not the only path by which these multiple determinants of marital quality might be configured. Equally conceivable is that it is the effect of children on marriage, perhaps mediated by the division of labor that affects psychological well-being. Data are not yet available, however, to distinguish between these alternatives.

In closing, it is perhaps wisest to emphasize the multiple means by which children can influence marriages. Ultimately it must be acknowledged that because children are not randomly assigned to couples, any effects of children on marriages or on the processes considered to mediate such effects cannot be thought of in narrowly causal terms.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN CHILDREN

With the exception of the developmental status of the oldest (or youngest) child in the family, investigators have tended to treat all children as if they were the same in their attempts to discern the effects of children on marriage. In this section, we consider three general parameters of individual differences (gender, temperament, and handicap/disability) on which some data exist to illuminate the issue of whether child effects on marriage vary as a function of characteristics of the child.

Gender

Worldwide surveys on the value of children reveal a near universal preference for sons over daughters, and it appears that child gender influences divorce practices too. Even though sons may function to keep marriages intact, their presence is not associated consistently with higher levels of marital quality.

Temperament

Over the past two decades developmental psychology has witnessed an explosion of interest in child temperament. In large measure this interest has its roots in efforts to understand how children shape the parental care they receive in their families and their social experiences more generally. As work on child effects has grown, it is not surprising that family researchers have endeavored to understand how individual differences in child temperament influence marital quality. Evidence exists linking an active-negative or difficult child temperament with compromised parent-child interaction, conflicted sibling relations, and even with parental depression. These data lead to the hypothesis that such a behavioral style should also be related to troubled, stressed, or less satisfied marital relations. One of the first investigations to provide evidence consistent with such reasoning revealed that when babies were particularly demanding (i.e.,

cried frequently, often “on the move,” had feeding problems), spouses experienced more difficulty in the transition to parenthood.

A more compelling set of findings shows that parental reports of infant temperament predict *change* in marital satisfaction from the last trimester of pregnancy through 4 months post-partum. The fact that postpartum temperament ratings were unrelated to prenatal marital satisfaction ratings increases confidence in the interpretation that child characteristics—at least as experienced by parents—affected the marital relationship.

Handicap/Disability

The contention that children affect marriages via the demands they place on adults in their parental roles leads to the expectation that children whose care ought to be especially demanding, namely, those with some kind of handicap or disability (including mental retardation), should create stress if not outright marital dissatisfaction. The available evidence provides empirical support for this notion and also highlights the complexity of child effects on marriage.

It is now well recognized that families respond differently to children's handicapping conditions and characteristics and that additional factors in the ecology of the family need to be considered including parental coping skills, economic resources, and attitudes and values.

A critical factor that must be taken into consideration is the relationship that exists between spouses prior to the handicapped/ disabled child's birth. In fact, it was noted that “in some cases, the handicapped child and the challenges involved were seen as a rewarding experience that actually strengthened the marriage and family”.

Conclusion

Not only are gender effects on marital stability and quality under investigation, but so too are more process-oriented dimensions of child behavior and development. It is clear that although the effects of child gender on marriage remain uncertain, there is consistent evidence that children with difficult temperaments place real stresses on marriages. Still unclear, however, is the extent to which such temperamental difficulties are organismically based or family generated. In any event, there is a need to reiterate continually a core theme, namely, that reciprocal rather than unidirectional processes of influence characterize child development in the family system. Moreover, such bidirectional processes of influence need to be considered within developmental, family, and community contexts. How individual differences in children affect marriages depends on the affective status of the marital relationship prior to the child's arrival and the other stressors and supports that exist within and beyond the household. When multiple stressors exist, it is easy to imagine how marriages are negatively affected by a handicapped or temperamentally difficult child. On the other hand, when instrumental and emotional supports are available to relieve stressed parents, especially demanding children need not adversely affect the husband-wife bond. Perhaps most heartening is the evidence showing that even in the face of child stressors, some marriages can thrive and prosper. It is therefore clear that process and context must be considered in order to understand the effects of individual differences of children on the marriage.

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