

## RESEARCH STATEMENT

It is no secret that divorce terminates roughly fifty percent of marriages. In fact, after only five years, twenty percent of all first marriages have disrupted. After ten years, that figure jumps to one-third. In 2007, there were approximately 2,197,000 marriages. In that same year, divorces or annulments totaled 856,000 ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov)). Additionally, national demographers report that a quarter of all adults under the age of forty-four are children of divorce. “We are talking about millions of people who are struggling with the residue of an experience that their parents would rather forget” (Wallerstein xxv). Indeed, significant numbers of children suffer for many years from continuing psychological and social obstacles within the post-divorce family. For years after the initial separation, various complications arise throughout the life course and the repercussions of parental action persist. This childhood event “can set in motion a chain of circumstances that affects individuals’ lives even after they have left home, married, and entered the labor force” (Cherlin 247). Multitudinous studies illustrate the plight of these children. Not only must they learn to navigate their new life, these disbanded marriages “silently shatter the individual’s guiding conception of the safety and reliability of his or her world” (Wallerstein 349). Judith Wallerstein, the primary researcher of the only 25-year longitudinal study on the long-term effects of divorce, notes that adult children of divorce “continued to regard their parents’ divorce as the major formative experience of their lives. A significant number were still burdened by vivid memories and flashbacks of the traumatic events at the time of the marital rupture” (Wallerstein 353).

Indeed, divorce is a life-transforming experience. Childhood changes. Adolescence changes. As more and more research shows, adulthood changes. “As the

marital bond breaks apart, relationships within the family change their course, and new, relatively uncertain relationships are created” (Wallerstein 349). Children are usually moved from the home that they know, are introduced to new significant others that come and go, are compelled to conform to the addition of step-parents and step-siblings that are perceived as an open threat to their existing relationships, and often serve as support structures for the custodial parent dealing with their own emotional trauma. “Another particular aspect of studying the long-term impact of divorce is, as every researcher has noted, that divorce is not a single event but a complex series of changes, a multistage process of radically changing family relationships, which begins in the failing marriage, continues through the often chaotic period of the marital rupture and its immediate aftermath, and continue further, often over several years of disequilibrium within the family” (Wallerstein 350). Most would agree that divorce is devastating in any person’s life, but children are expected to contend with these immense shifts before they are even fully cognitively developed. Most certainly, these changes cause a re-wiring of a child’s psyche.

Difficulties in parent/child relationships are one of the first visible ramifications of family disruption. “Observations have shown repeatedly that the ways in which parents and children relate to each other may alter profoundly under the impact of separation and the multiple ripple effects of its extended aftermath” (Wallerstein 116). The relationships between divorced parents and their children become stunted from the time of separation. The National Survey of Children conducted by Frank Furstenberg concluded that, in most families, marital disruption effectively destroys the ongoing emotional connection between children and the biological parent living outside the home

(Wallerstein 356). A study led by Norval Glenn and Michelle Bryant of The University of Texas found that while two-thirds of children from intact families went to their parents for comfort or guidance, only one-third of children from divorced families did so. Grown children of divorce were much more likely to go to siblings or friends or to have dealt with problems on their own (Bryant 31). The study also found that adult children of divorce were “seven times more likely to agree with the statement, ‘I was alone a lot as a child.’ The frequent absence of their parents—whether they were living in another household, working or dating—made a lasting impact” (Bryant 30). Sadly, diminished parenting is quite common in families of divorce, mostly due to the decreased availability of the custodial parent because of work responsibilities, new dating relationships, and their own healing process. Wallerstein notes in the parent a “sharp decline in emotional sensitivity and emotional support for the child, decreased pleasure in the relationship, decreased attentiveness to the child’s needs and wishes, less talk, less play, less interaction altogether, and steep escalation in the inappropriate expression of anger” (Wallerstein 117). Potentially, these behaviors stem out of a conscious or unconscious perception of the child as an economic, social, or psychological burden, as well as an exasperating reminder of their own failed marriage. Ironically, custodial parents often simultaneously develop a fervent attachment to and dependence on their child. It is not uncommon for the distraught parent to rely on the child to fulfill a broad range of psychological and social needs. The adolescent may serve the parent as “arbiter, protector, advisor, parent, sibling, comrade-in-arms against the other parent or against the world, confidante, lover, or concubine. Or, the child may serve as a key figure who wards off the parent’s depression or ego disintegration” (Wallerstein 119).

Various modes of diminished parenting lead many adult children of divorce to feel like they have missed out on their childhood. They were unable to experience a normal developmental course because the responsibilities they carry for themselves and others prove too strenuous. There is a large group of children who “take on a responsibility for their own upbringing that taxes them beyond their capacities” (Wallerstein 117). Taking on such heavy loads of responsibility so early in life leads to a fierce independence. Several researchers have called attention to the “independence and maturity that characterize many young people in divorced families and have noted as well the increase in children’s participation with the custodial parent as equals in day-to-day responsibilities of the household and the increase in friendship and communication between child and parent” (Wallerstein 116). Although many children of divorce were “proud of their enhanced maturity and independence, they spoke of the divorce as having cut short their childhood” (Wallerstein 353). Glenn and Bryant also reported that many of their research subjects “noted having to grow up too soon and the feeling of having to carefully negotiate between two parents’ worlds—which may have held different beliefs, values and lifestyles. As a result, many children of divorce said they felt divided” (Bryant 30). Many of these children felt a need to develop a chameleon personality, becoming different people with their mother and their father. These adaptations and navigations require a cognitive capacity way beyond the reasonable expectations of children and prove to remain troublesome as the child enters adolescence and adulthood.

By adulthood, the effects of divorce are most prominently seen in romantic relationships. Glenn and Bryant discovered that “experiencing parental divorce during childhood has a ‘sleeper effect.’ Its worst symptoms often appear when children of

divorce leave home and try to form intimate relationships and families of their own, but do so with much less ability to trust and little idea of what a lasting marriage looks like” (Bryant 28). Adults who experienced parental divorce are “no less eager than their peers who grew up in intact families for passionate love, sexual intimacy, and commitment. But they are haunted by powerful ghosts from their childhoods that tell them that they, like their parents, will not succeed” (Wallerstein xiii). Fear and distrust abound. Even amicable divorces have these long-term effects. Glenn and Bryant’s research illustrated a common belief among adult children of divorce—“If the parents whose marriage failed are obviously good people who could cooperate and avoid destructive behaviors after the divorce, their offspring may be more inclined to lose confidence in the institution of marriage itself... Even by being good people and by marrying good people, they feel they cannot assure that their marriage will work” (Bryant 27). Numerous studies show that children of divorce are more likely to divorce during their own adulthood than children raised in intact families. Eleven national surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center show that the divorce and/or separation rate for white, female children of divorce was 60% greater than white females from intact families. The rate for white male children of divorce was 35% greater than those from intact families (Wallerstein 357). Additionally, for both men and women from divorced families, the trend is “sexual permissiveness without an ability to make commitments” (Wallerstein 357). Furthermore, the young women from divorced families “are likely to show the least permissiveness in social-emotional attitudes, combined with greater active sexual behavior... their attitudes and values are in direct conflict with their behavior” (Wallerstein 357). As such, many adult children from separated families also contend with the cognitive dissonance created

when behavior does not reflect ideals. Parental divorce causes various cyclical complications in adult relationships because it is “unlike any other seemingly similar life experience for a child, such as parental loss through death, in being specifically rooted in the failure of the relationship between the man and the woman who model for the child the reliability of love and commitment” (Wallerstein 350).

Despite all the difficulties that children of divorce face throughout their life course, many come out stronger. Wallerstein’s longitudinal study showed that many adults who have weathered their parents’ divorce are “extremely successful in their chosen careers, having learned how to be independent, resourceful, and flexible. Having invented their own moral path, they are decent, caring adults who managed to build good marriages in spite of their fears. Most are excellent parents” (Wallerstein xiv).

The findings of these various research studies are overwhelmingly supported by the anecdotal experience I have encountered. Both in my own family and in the families of people I have spoken with, the adult children of divorce continue to grapple with a range of life obstacles. Though the majority of us are quite independent and successful in our career endeavors, relationship strife abounds. We all regard the divorce of our parents as a turning point in our emotional development and often feel the pain of diminished parenting. Because these circumstances prove so common among the adult children of divorce, this project has the potential to speak to and for us all.

## Works Consulted

Amato, Paul R., and Juliana M. Sobolewski. "The Effects of Divorce and Marital Discord on Adult Children's Psychological Well-Being." *American Sociological Review* 66.6 (2001): 900-21.

*Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2008*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. National Vital Statistics Reports 57:19 (2008). 6 October 2009 <<http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/divorce/htm>>.

Cherlin, Andrew J., Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, and Christine McRae. "Effects of Parental Divorce on Mental Health Throughout the Life Course." *American Sociological Review* 63.2 (1998): 239-49.

*Cohabitation, Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage in the United States*. National Center for Health Statistics. Vital and Health Statistics 23:22 (2002).

Bryant, Michelle. "Divorce Hurts Children." *Opposing Viewpoints Series: Divorce*. Detroit: Greenhaven, 2009.

Wallerstein, Judith S., Julia M. Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee. *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25-Year Landmark Study*. New York: Hyperion, 2001.

Wallerstein, Judith S. "The Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review." *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 30.3 (1991): 349-60.

Wallerstein, Judith S. "The Overburdened Child: Some Long-Term Consequences of Divorce." *Social Work* 30.2 (1985): 116-23.