

Spring 2003

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Recommended Citation

Costello, Dean (2003) "Effects of Divorce on Future Relationships," *ESSAI*: Vol. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol1/iss1/13>

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Effects of Divorce on Future Relationships

by Dean Costello

(English 102)

The Assignment: Write a five-page, explanatory paper based on “Cinderella” and its thematically related topics; integrate and document one to four sources.

Divorce has become a common occurrence in everyday American life. More and more it seems that divorce rates soar higher and higher. Even in simple childhood fairytales such as “Cinderella,” single parenting impacts the setting and outcome of the story. Contrary to most real life stories of single parenting, Cinderella meets a prince, marries him and lives happily ever after, seemingly unaffected by her family history of failed marriages. This fairytale leaves us with the notion that any scenario, no matter how insurmountable the odds seem, can be overcome. But unlike in the fairytale “Cinderella,” divorce really is a problem that affects people both in forging personal relationships while growing up and in finding happiness through marriage. When parents divorce, the future relationships of children can be damaged.

One effect children of divorce sometimes feel is a cycle of abuse and unhappiness that seems to follow just one step behind them no matter what path they choose in relationships. This may be the case either directly after the divorce or years down the road in the child’s future relationships, including marriage. Mary Field Belenky, psychologist, and her co-author colleagues, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Mary Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, authors of the book, Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind, believe the parent-child bond is lost or severely weakened in most cases of separation or divorce (180). In a case where the relationship is weak from the start, communication is now even more severely hindered when the parents must interact with the child only on a one to one basis. The parents are on their own, so to speak, and social interaction can be very difficult without help from outside sources (Belenky et al. 180). Judith S. Wallerstein, senior lecturer emerita at the School of Social Welfare at the University of California at Berkeley and her co-author colleagues Julia M. Lewis and Sandra Blakeslee, authors of the book, The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study, believe that while it is true that the scenarios of divorce can be very different, the effects can be strikingly similar (89). Some children carry on abusive relationships of their own with gangs or other violent groups, some are drawn to drugs and alcohol and others grow up never even to get married for fear of ending up like the failed marriage they witnessed growing up (Wallerstein et al. 192).

There is no doubt that a failed marriage has a profound effect on children, but a common misconception is the assumption that children of divorce are more likely to divorce because they are less committed to marriage (Wallerstein et al. 197). While this is a possibility, in many cases it is untrue. Wallerstein et al. also believe that children of divorce will go to nearly any means possible to avoid divorce, even more so if they have children (197). Wallerstein claims that a failed marriage is almost unacceptable in the minds of children of divorce because they witnessed first hand the unhappiness that divorce brought to their parents and to themselves (197). Abuse and unhappiness are tolerable for children of divorce because they have been brought up and taught that these are a part of marriage. Unhappiness is a theme present in the story, “Cinderella.” Jacqueline M. Schectman, director of training at the Jung Institute of Boston and author of “Cinderella and the Loss of Father Love,” believes Cinderella’s father remarries to bring comfort and stability into his and Cinderella’s life but instead he brings his own grief and distributes it throughout the family (577). The newly wed stepmother is left just as alone as she was before getting re-married; only now she has an extra child who was left behind for her to care for. Cinderella leaps at the possibility of a stable and secure male relationship with a prince who will rescue her from an unhappy family life. Rushing into a commitment as important as marriage is likely to result in many unpleasant surprises and an unhappy marriage. Of course, there are other reasons people rush into marriage, leading us to the next example of the effects of divorce on future relationships.

Children of divorce are more anxious and uncomfortable with the opposite sex and it's harder for them to build a relationship and gradually give it time to fully develop (Wallerstein et al. 38). Many are unhappy with themselves and feel that if someone is willing to marry them they might as well jump on the chance while it is available (Wallerstein et al. 73). This is a very poor attitude to have towards a life partner. Many also feel that they do not have the option of choosing a partner when the time is right and end up rushing into a marriage that is doomed from the start (Wallerstein et al. 73). To put it blatantly, many children of divorce doubt they have a choice in choosing a partner. Again, this is another occurrence in the story, "Cinderella." Cinderella has options of staying in an unhappy home with her stepmother and stepsisters or taking the chance at a marriage that might go well. Like Cinderella, many children of divorce impulsively marry people they hardly know for fear of falling in love (Wallerstein et al. 191). The example of divorce set by the parents becomes the child's negative connotation of love. To them falling in love means getting hurt and from early childhood, marriage is something these children want nothing to do with. Another interesting point Wallerstein makes is that some children of divorce, in an effort to avoid getting hurt, throw themselves into marriages that they know will not last (192). This is the complete opposite mentality of the women mentioned previously who were scared enough of divorce to withstand abuse and unhappiness. These women reasoned that a divorce was "not a big deal" so they might as well take a chance and hope for the best (Wallerstein et al. 192). Wallerstein's research showed that women who rushed into marriage, with little or no hope for a joyful or long lasting relationship, all shared the trait of having low expectations of themselves (192). Most believed that they could do no better even if given the chance (Wallerstein et al. 192). This is unfortunate, not only for them but also for the partners who are unknowingly entering marriages that do not share an equal importance to their spouse. There is a difference, however, between rushing into marriage and not caring who the marriage partner is.

Not caring who the marriage partner is seems like a terrible notion of what marriage should be like, but it is the way some children of divorce actually feel. To them, marriage is a fixed institution destined only for failure so the choice of a mate has almost no significance (Wallerstein et al. 31). As in the example last mentioned, the mentality that marriage is unimportant is prevalent but in a slightly different form. To these children of divorce, the person they married didn't really matter because, "a nice decent woman who wouldn't cheat and could make the place look like a home would do fine" (Wallerstein et al. 260). This is a problem because if the marriage ends in failure it reassures the spouse that he or she was right all along, they are doomed for a bad marriage, or that they are hopeless in establishing a stable relationship (Wallerstein et al. 263). Even worse, if the marriage fails and is lost with no warning at all, recovery can take years or even decades (Wallerstein et al. 197). After an event as traumatic as an unexpected failed marriage, the idea that finding a new partner doesn't really matter starts to set in and that is probably the worst scenario of the three mentioned. According to Wallerstein, the main reason men don't hear the cries and complaints of their wives is that they mute or shut down their own feelings in situations that can hurt their feelings (262). When refusing their own feelings they grow accustomed to ignoring the feelings of others as well (Wallerstein et al. 262). Wallerstein also states that because these feelings have been shut out for so long, even understanding the facial expressions of a woman is like a foreign language (264). After all signs of unhappiness had been ignored, the women packed up and left, leaving the men shattered and unable to see a point in marrying any particular person (Wallerstein et al. 264). This isn't exactly the case in "Cinderella" but the idea of Cinderella not really caring much about the person she marries is present. In the story she meets a prince, dances with him, and a few days later marries him. This is not unlike people who suddenly lose a marriage, with what seems to be little or no warning, then see no reason in finding any particular person to marry. In both scenarios the spouse immediately available to them is good enough to help them escape an unhappy family life or the unfulfilling reality they are currently involved in.

The effects of divorce can vary from case to case but the underlying theme is that children of divorce are affected in future relationships. Divorce is more acceptable in today's society than ever before and this affects children in nearly every aspect of their lives, from personal relationships with friends to intimate relationships that might possibly lead to marriage. Even in childhood stories such as

“Cinderella,” divorce affects the upbringing and the types of relationships available to her. Unfortunately, the “happily ever after” ending is not one that is quite so familiar for real life children of divorce.

Works Cited

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