

WANTED: CANADA'S MISSING DIVORCE DEBATE

DIVORCE AS A SOCIAL PHENOMENON IS WIDESPREAD, AND SOME SCHOLARS SAY THE EFFECTS CAN LAST A LIFETIME. SO WHY AREN'T WE TALKING ABOUT IT?

by Kate Fraher



Forget about climate change: Forty years ago the social equivalent of it hit Canada. It was not a tsunami, something that crashes to the shore and destroys everything in sight all at once, but rather more like the slow and gradual creep of rising temperatures or tides. The problem? Canada's divorce rate multiplied five times from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1980s.¹ "No-fault divorce," enacted in Canada in 1968 meant couples could divorce for reasons outside of infidelity and apparently, many jumped to take advantage of the newfound freedom. Statistics tell us that in 1998 36,252 children witnessed their parents divorce;² some estimate today that almost half of divorces in Canada involve children.³ That's a large group of kids, hit with a social phenomenon that has brought many a family into counselling but at the same time, is now so common that few blink an eye. Should we? What is the emotional or mental toll of divorce on kids? In Canada we have little idea for the simple reason we have chosen not to research it.

The effects of divorce on children's mental and emotional health sounds like a reasonable avenue of study. But in Canada, you'd be hard-pressed to find a scholar will-

ing to take some data sets and extract meaningful analysis about the emotional effects of divorce on children. The Canadian government has collected some data, including the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth, but does not draw any conclusions about emotional effects from it. Other analyses reflect the economics of divorce, domestic violence in the home and child support. This lack of movement on the marriage issue stands in stark opposition to the situation just south of the border where marriage, divorce and kids are the substance of study, research, and even personal reflections. In short, it is valid to ask whether Canadian social scientists are failing a generation of kids, some of whom are now adults, who were affected by divorce. When Canadian kids of divorce have questions about emotional turmoil and short- or long-term effects, they'll need to prepare themselves for a protracted silence.

Literature in the United States

This is not the case in the United States, where scholars have concluded that the effects of divorce can change and even worsen over time. Social scholar Judith Wallerstein suggests that divorce can have a "sleeping effect," where the long-term emotional problems of parental divorce do not surface until young adulthood when children begin forming romantic attachments of their own. Her work spurred others to explore the long-lasting effects of divorce in more detail. These ideas are a reminder that data collection on children of divorce should be a frequent and ongoing process spanning many years.⁴

Canadian social scholars admit that scholars in the United States have done some excellent work on the subject. Since Canadian social problems can, in some cases, mirror those of the United States, this is evidence that divorce could be affecting Canadian kids adversely, too. Jennifer Jenkins, professor of human development and applied psychology at the University of Toronto, says there is no reason to think that research findings from studies done in the U.S. and U.K. cannot be generalized to include Canada.⁵

One American scholar to study the long-term effects of divorce on children is Dr. Paul R. Amato, a professor of sociology at Pennsylvania State University.⁶ In one study, "The Effects of Divorce and Marital Discord on Adult Children's Psychological Well-Being," which he co-authored with Juliana M. Sobolewski, Amato concludes, "our study contributes to a growing literature demonstrating that discord and disruption in the family of origin can have consequences for offspring that persist well into adulthood" and although divorce is widely accepted, it "does not mean that

its consequences for children are benign.” He says that previous studies show that adults with divorced parents “report greater unhappiness, less satisfaction with life, a weaker sense of personal control, more symptoms of anxiety and depression, and a greater use of mental health services.”⁷ He also posits that with the weakening of parent-child bonds which accompanies parental separation and the frequency with which parents separate in the United States, American society could see a “gradual weakening of the bonds between the generations and a decline in the mean psychological well-being of the population.”⁸ More of this type of dialogue among social scientists on the emotional/psychological effects of divorce is needed in Canada.

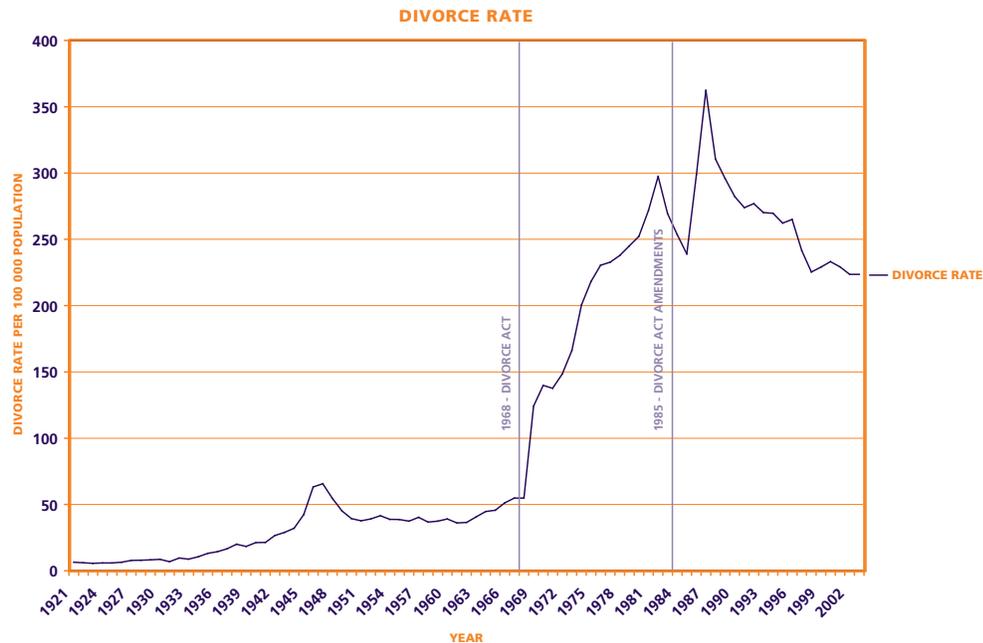
One of the difficulties in studying the effects of divorce is, as Amato explains, that divorce is really “the first step in a series of family transitions to which children must adjust.”⁹ Because divorce can result in a loss of parental income, a change of address, a change of schools, parental depression and subsequent marriages and divorces, it is challenging for researchers to sort out exactly which of these factors causes the most harm to children. Some have suggested that parental divorce is not the root problem, rather that other occurrences before and after parental divorce are the real cause of children’s negative outcomes. Again, this highlights the importance of conducting studies which are longitudinal in nature and methodologically sound.

The Canadian search for divorce stats

The only long-term study of Canadian children is the National Longitudinal Study of Children and Youth (NLSCY) which began in 1994. The study is a massive collection of data on children and youth derived from surveys asking detailed questions such as, “how did your child respond to his or her first bath?” (to parents) and “how many times have you skipped class without permission” (to children). Academics have been able to write reports on a wide range of topics such as childhood obesity, child-care patterns, and child custody and access from data derived exclusively from the NLSCY

One Canadian researcher has used this data to examine children’s mental health after divorce. Lisa Strohschein, a professor of sociology at the University of Alberta, thinks she is the only Canadian to use NLSCY data for this purpose.¹⁰ Her study, “Parental Divorce and Child Mental Health Trajectories,” was published in 2005 and she hopes to release another report on findings from more recent data collections soon.¹¹ When asked why more

scholars have not used this data to study child mental health outcomes and parental divorce, she says this type of data is restricted by Statistics Canada and the process to get permission to use it can be fairly intense. She also suspects that once the data collection process is complete, the data will be more useful, and more academics will want to use it.¹²



SOURCE: Calculations by author using data from Statistics Canada

There are other opinions on why Canadians are not writing more about the emotional/psychological effects of divorce on children. Don Kerr, a professor of sociology at King’s University College at the University of Western Ontario admits that the issue is a politically contentious one. He says it’s possible that government agencies such as Statistics Canada and Human Resources and Social Development Canada are not willing to grapple with it for that reason. While this work may be necessary, he warns that overstating the problem, moralizing or stigmatizing persons or families experiencing the difficulties of divorce is not helpful.¹³

Most Canadians might expect the scientist, including the social scientist, to turn a blind eye to the whims of emotions. Not so. Douglas Farrow, a professor of religious studies at McGill University and a consultant with the Institute for the Study of Marriage, Law and Culture, speculates that party politics and political correctness prevent Canada from tackling some of the most contentious issues related to children and family. In the process of legalizing same-sex marriage, he notes, the government showed little or no interest in studying what the redefinition of marriage would mean for Canadian society. He believes the decision to pass same-sex marriage legislation without research into the possible outcomes for children suggests “a combination of apathy and cowardice at the political level.”¹⁴

It was politically inconvenient, says Farrow, for politi-

cal parties to stand up to the court's judgment in the case of homosexual marriage for fear that they would be labelled either "anti-Charter" or "anti-gay." Farrow wonders why few lessons seem to have been learned from previous changes to marriage law, which were also introduced without adequate study, such as those that made divorce easier, but on the positive side, he notes that "scholars of varying political stripes are beginning to realize that the research needs to be done before precipitous changes are made." And he thinks that funding agencies would be open to giving money to a research project on family structure, parenting, and children's outcomes if the project were properly constructed and had the necessary expertise.¹⁵ "Studies of the children of divorced parents show that they tend to be disadvantaged and troubled. That should lead to less divorce or at least to more effort to help people stay married. Instead some seem to think that we should downplay the importance of marriage and intact families. Then those who aren't a part of it won't feel so bad," says Farrow.¹⁶

Personal stories from the States

While statisticians continue to accuse one another of inadequate sampling and uncontrolled variables, more personal stories of divorce are surfacing from the United States; they are written by the first generation of children raised under no-fault divorce and therefore after divorce became a widespread phenomenon. Although their books are largely discounted by academics for being "unscientific" or "retrospective," the popularity of their message suggests that their experience is not the exception. As the first generation of children raised with widespread divorce in America speak, a common theme can be felt in their writing: At the time of their parents' divorce and even now, they struggle with feelings of being misunderstood and alone. Elizabeth Marquardt, an affiliate scholar at the Institute for American Values and an adult child of divorce herself, is the author of *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*. In her book, she explains very clearly why she chose to write what she did: "I felt that my parents and the culture at large had very little understanding of my real experience. . . . Too many people thought that because my parents loved me and didn't fight, or because their divorce took place before I could remember, or because I had managed to grow up and become a reasonably functional person, then the divorce must not have been a big deal."¹⁷ Ava Chin, in the introduction to her book *Split: Stories from a Generation Raised on Divorce*¹⁸, repeats the same theme: "In putting together this book, I wanted to finally reveal what it was like for us, the first generation that grew up in divorced families en masse. I wanted to hear from the very generation that until now had remained silent. What was it like for them to watch their home life split in two? How did they juggle their relationship with parents who were learning to fly solo again, many of whom later remarried? And now in their twenties and thirties, what were their

takes on love and marriage today?"¹⁹

Many other books have been written by adult children of divorce over the past several years.²⁰ The authors repeat a sense of frustration at feeling unheard in their experience as children, and now as grown-up children of divorced parents.

Where are the Canadian voices?

So why aren't Canadian adult children of divorce speaking out about their experience? Why aren't Canadian academics and Canadian governments discussing the emotional and psychological effects of parental divorce? It could be that silence will reign until social scientists undertake some good research. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, American social scholar and author of *The Divorce Culture*, says "social scientists are among the chief arbiters of what constitutes a social problem. It is they who are called upon to define the size and scope of a problem and to identify the populations most at risk."²¹

On climate change there may be disagreement on what causes it, how it happens – and how to respond. But we still do a whole lot more than merely document rising temperatures. We ask why, and we ask how we, as a society, might suffer consequences, in an attempt to prepare for them. With divorce, we documented the rising trend, and promptly shelved that data to let the dust collect. The astounding lack of curiosity on marriage matters – and the effect on children – is something Canadians would be wise to overcome.

endnotes

- 1 Dumas, J. and Y. Péron. (1992). Marriage and conjugal life in Canada: Current demographic analysis. Ottawa: Statistics Canada Catalogue, 91-534E.
- 2 Ambert, A.M. (2005). Divorce: Facts, causes, and consequences. *Contemporary Family Trends*. Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family, p. 8. Retrieved from http://www.vifamily.ca/library/cft/divorce_05.pdf
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 Wallerstein, Lewis and Blakeslee discuss the "sleeper effect" in their 2000 book, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: The 25 Year Landmark Study*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- 5 J. Jenkins, personal communication, February 8, 2007
- 6 His studies, world renowned, include the following: Amato, P.R. (1994). Life-span adjustment of children to their parents' divorce. *The Future of Children*, vol. 4, no.1: 143-164 and Amato, P.R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The Future of Children* vol. 15, no.2: 75-96 and Amato, P.R., & Booth, A. (1991). Consequences of parental divorce and marital unhappiness for adult well-being. *Social Forces*, 69, 895-914.
- 7 Amato, P.R. & Sobolewski, J.M. (2001). The effects of divorce and marital discord on adult children's psychological well-being. *American Sociological Review* vol. 66, issue 6, p. 901.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 918.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 917.
- 10 L. Strohschein, personal communication, March 12, 2007.
- 11 Strohschein, L. (2005). Parental divorce and child mental health trajectories. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67: 1286-1300.
- 12 L. Strohschein, personal communication, March 12, 2007.
- 13 D. Kerr, personal communication, February 2, 2007.
- 14 D. Farrow, personal communication, February 20, 2007.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Marquardt, E. (2005). *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce*. New York: Crown Publishers, p. 169.
- 18 Chin, A. (Ed.). (2002). *Split: Stories from a Generation Raised on Divorce*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Among them, these two: Stall, S. (2000). *The Love They Lost: Living with the legacy of our parents' divorce*. New York: Delta. Abbas, J. (2004). *Generation Ex: Adult children of divorce and the healing of our pain*. Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press.
- 21 Whitehead, B.D. (1997). *The Divorce Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., p. 104.