

# A STATISTICAL PROFILE OF ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Chapters 3 and 4

Kathryn Ann Peace - 1991

## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

This chapter deals with the methodological and procedural techniques employed to test the research questions. The following discussion includes: a) a description of sampling methods used, b) a formal statement of research questions, c) a description of the operationalization of concepts derived from the review of literature, d) an explanation of data reduction techniques, and e) a brief delineation of the statistical procedures used in comparative testing.

### Sampling

To provide data for theoretical solutions to the research questions of this study, a subsample of the General Social Surveys (GSS) 1972-1989 was used. The GSS is an annually collected survey, cumulatively compiled, by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). The sampling frame used by NORC consists of the adult, English speaking, non-institutionalized population residing in the continental United States (see Davis, 1989 for details in the sampling procedures used by NORC). It is important to note that the subsample used for this study is a national level data set.

Survey techniques used by NORC have changed over the years. Early samples were drawn based on a modified probability strategy in which the interviewer had some flexibility in selection of respondents, based on a quota of social types at the block level. The later surveys (1977 to 1988) used a full probability sampling strategy in which respondents were predesignated at the NORC site. Interviewers had no prerogative in the respondent selection process. Further, some earlier studies over sampled minority populations in 1982 and 1987. Because weighted corrections for oversampling of minorities are present in the data, all surveys taken from 1972 through 1989 will be used here (N=24,893 before criteria reductions and list wise deletions).

### Research Questions

Central to this study is the general hypothesis that life will be more difficult for a person whose parents divorced during, or prior to, the person's adolescence, when compared to those whose parents did not divorce. Therefore, comparisons will be made between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of intact marriages. To further gauge the impact of parental divorce on adult children, comparisons will be made between adult children of divorce and those who did not live with both parents because of a death. Specific hypotheses are derived from the literature as follows:

H1: Adult children of divorced parents have a greater propensity for divorce than adult children of intact marriages. No difference is expected between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of deceased parents regarding propensity for divorce.

H2: Adult children of divorced parents have lower levels of life satisfaction (lower mental well-being scores) than adult children of intact marriages. No difference is expected between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of deceased parents regarding life satisfaction.

H3: Adult children of divorced parents achieve lower socioeconomic status (occupational prestige, educational attainment, family income) than adult children of intact marriages. No difference is expected between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of deceased parents regarding socioeconomic status.

H4: Adult children of divorced parents perceive themselves to encounter higher levels of life stress than adult children of intact marriages. No difference is expected between adult children of divorced parents and adult children of deceased parents regarding levels of life stress perceived by respondents.

#### Operationalization

Complete codebook information detailing the variables used on this study can be found in the Appendix, and can be fully understood by reading the General Social Surveys, 1972-1989: Cumulative Codebook (Davis & Smith, 1989). It is sufficient for purposes of this study to note that the GSS contains cumulative survey data on all of the variables mentioned in the hypotheses of interest.

#### Data Reduction

Because the GSS contains survey responses from the U.S. population of adults 18 years of age and older, certain reductions in the full sample are made to focus any generalizations of findings on the group of interest. The first criterion for inclusion in the study is that respondents must have been married at least once. To accomplish this, all never married respondents were dropped from the sample. The second and third criteria for inclusion are age and chance for educational attainment. Reasonably, persons aged 19 or 20 may have yet to fully experience the hypothesized effects of parental divorce, since they themselves may not have had the opportunity to marry, finish college, or experience the stresses that accompany childrearing and parenting. To inform the data reduction procedure and to provide "ball park" cut off points, the U.S. Statistical Abstracts (1988) reveal the average age at first marriage in 1988 was 25.9 years for men and 23.6 years for women. It could be argued that the increase in the average age at first marriage is due to increasing demands for higher educational attainment for purposes of employment. By age 23, which is four years after the standard age for high school graduation, we have allowed substantial time for respondents to have experienced some success or failure in marriage, education, and employment. Therefore, persons under the age of 23 years will be dropped from the sample. With these reductions, the sample stands at 20,125 respondents (N=8,571 men and N=11,554 women). Because of these data reductions, any findings of the study may be more safely generalized to U.S. citizens, over 22 years of age, who have been married at least once.

#### Independent Variable

For purposes of comparison, a variable was created by dividing the sample into three groups designed to designate each respondent as an adult child of divorced parents, an adult child with absent parents, or an adult child from an intact family. Assignment to a group is dependent on subject responses to the questions, "With whom were you living at the time you were 16?", and "If not living with both own mother and father: what happened?". Respondents whose parents were divorced or separated were scored 3. Those who had one or both parents die, or had one or both parents in an institution were scored 2. Respondents living with both parents were scored 1. The reader is reminded that scoring respondents on this variable is for nominal discriminations only, and that this strategy allows for comparisons to be made between two major groups (divorced parents and intact marriages), with an added comparison between the two major and one "control" group (deceased parents).

### Dependent Variables

Propensity for Divorce is the dependent variable of interest in the first research question. It is measured by combining the marital status questions, "Are you currently - married, widowed, divorced, separated, or have you never been married?", and "If you are currently married or widowed, have you ever been divorced or legally separated?". These questions will be combined to achieve a variable Propensity for Divorce, with persons currently separated or divorced, or ever divorced scored 1, and persons ever married but, never divorced or separated scored 2 (see the Appendix, variable name DIVORCE).

Life Satisfaction is the dependent variable for research question two, and is measured in two ways. First, using responses to the Global Happiness Item, "Taking this all together, how happy would you say you are? 1=very happy, 2=pretty happy, 3=not too happy" provides a general view of respondents life satisfaction. While not a complete measure of life satisfaction, the global happiness item has been shown to correlate highly with other measures of life satisfaction, and with risk of mental impairment (Lowe & Witt, 1984; Witt et al., 1980). Second, data for various specific levels of satisfaction (i.e., satisfaction with friends, family, city, health, and hobbies) are contained in the GSS. These variables were combined to create a composite variable, Satisfaction. Intercorrelations between Happiness, Satisfaction, and the specific satisfaction questions are presented in Table 1.

Measures of Socioeconomic Status pertain to research question three. These measures consist of occupational prestige scores, educational attainment, and family income. Occupational Prestige is defined by the prestige score assigned to the respondent's occupation by NORC (see Davis & Smith, 1988 for details). Educational attainment is simply the number of successfully completed years of formal education. Family Income is based on a self report of family income compared with American families in general and scored 1=far below average, 2=below average, 3=average, 4=above average, and 5=far above average. This is a subjective measure in which the "average" income was a standard in the mind of the respondent.

Life stress is the measurement used as the dependent variable for research question four. The variable is a self report item indicating the actual number of traumatic events as unemployment, hospitalization, disabilities, and deaths of family members during the five years preceding the time of interview. Scores range from 0 (no trauma present) to 4 (four or more events).

### Statistical Procedures

Initial analysis contains a table of basic statistics which profile the total sample on demographic characteristics, offering sight comparisons of differences between the groups. To begin answering the research questions, straightforward tests of significant differences and relationships will be used (Chi Square and Pearson Correlations). Comparisons between groups will identify significant differences where differences exist and percentages will be pointed out as differences emerge. All variables used in cross tabulations were either categorical in the raw data, or were collapsed into categories prior to analysis. For example, occupational prestige was a continuous variable (using census coding of occupations). For cross tabulations, occupational prestige was defined into four equal appearing categories ranging from low to high prestige based on approximately 25% of the sample in each category.

#### Limitations

There are some methodological limitations that should be mentioned. First, the respondents were volunteers, which may serve to skew results in some unknown ways. However, respondents were interviewed by personnel who were extensively trained by NORC in probing and interrogative techniques. Second, as in any cross sectional sampling, true effects of independent variables on dependent variables are estimated effects at best. For this study, parental divorce is theoretically in the process of affecting outcomes in the lives of adult children of divorce. Therefore, the extent of final effects may not be known. Third, readers of this study should be cautioned regarding the difference between statistical significance and importance of relationships that emerge in analysis. The sheer size of the cumulative GSS will serve to allow very small relationships to appear significant. While these relationships may or may not be of any importance, the sample size does lend assurance that the relationships found are real.

### CHAPTER IV FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter details the findings of data analysis. What follows is a demographic description of the sample, and the results of statistical tests of hypotheses one through four.

#### Demographic Profile

The subsample of the surveys includes respondents across the United States (see Table 2 for basic statistics). After reductions for purposes of this analysis, the size of the sample was 20,125, with 57.4% female and 42.6% male respondents. Ages of respondents ranged from 23 years of age to 89 with the average age falling at 48.40 years. Respondents were 85.7% white, 13.7% black and 1.6% other backgrounds. Currently married respondents comprised 72.5% of the sample. The widowed were 12.6%, divorced 10.6%, and separated 4.2% at the time of interview. Seventeen percent of the sample had experienced divorce at least once by the time of interview.

In terms of socioeconomic status, 33.3% had a high school diploma. Those with some high school training amounted to 33.6%, with 19.0% having been educated beyond the high school level. Low to moderate income was reported by 40.6% of the sample. Approximately twenty percent were poor, and 25.7% indicated they had a high income. Occupational prestige showed 22.4% to be very low, 24.6% low, 22.9% moderate, and 23.4% high prestige.

Categorical cut-off points for socioeconomic status variables can be found in variable definitions in Appendix.

### Research Question 1

Research question one stated that adult children of divorced parents have a greater propensity for divorce than adult children of intact marriages. Data analysis supports this assertion. Twenty nine percent of adult children of divorce have experienced divorce themselves. Comparatively, children of intact families experience divorce themselves only 15.2% of the time, and the control grouping, children with absent parents, have 20.1% divorces as adults. Figure 1 graphically illustrates this finding.

These differences are statistically significant, with a chi-square value of 215.47 (df=2,  $p < .0001$ , see Table 3). Pearson correlations suggest a negative relationship between the independent variable and divorce as adults ( $r = -.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, as respondent scores change on the independent variable from 1 (intact parental marriage) to 3 (having divorced parents), the likelihood of divorce in their own lives increases. Thus, research question 1 is supported in data analysis.

### Research Question 2

The second research question states that adult children of divorced parents have a lower life satisfaction than adult children of intact families. This is supported in data analysis (see Figure 2). Twenty seven percent of adult children of divorce consider themselves very happy. Comparatively, children of intact families considering themselves very happy are 36.1%, and the control grouping, children with absent parents, consider themselves very happy 34.6% of the time. Conversely, 15.3% of the adult children of divorce said they were "not too happy". Children of intact families responded "not too happy" 10.8% of the time, and 13.4% of children with absent parents were "not too happy".

These differences are statistically significant, with a chi-square value of 69.08 (df=4,  $p < .0001$ , see Table 3). Pearson correlations suggest a positive relationship between the independent variable and divorce as adults ( $r = .06$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Satisfaction, the composite variable of several specific satisfaction levels, was significantly distributed across the three groups to show less satisfaction among adult children of divorce, with a chi-square value of 136.33 (df=64,  $p < .0001$ , see Table 3). Pearson correlations suggest a positive relationship between the independent variable and satisfaction as adults ( $r = .07$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In other words, as respondent scores change on the independent variable from 1 (intact parental marriage) to 3 (having divorced parents), the likelihood of unhappiness in their own lives increases. Thus, research question 2 is supported in data analysis.

### Research Question 3

The third research question, that adult children of divorce will have a lower socioeconomic status than adult children of intact marriages, is supported in data analysis. The occupational prestige scores indicated that children of intact families have a higher job prestige than the intact parent group (see Figure 3). Approximately twenty two percent of adult children of divorce have a higher prestige occupation, while 26.8% of adult children of intact families have a higher prestige occupation. Only 19.6% of adult children with absent parents reported a higher prestige occupation. The percentages for moderate prestige are similarly distributed at

29.7%, 25.5%, and 22.5% for respondents with divorced, intact, and absent parents respectively. The same is true for low prestige occupations.

These differences are statistically significant, with a chi-square value of 180.06 ( $df=6$ ,  $p<.0001$ , see Table 3). Pearson correlations suggest a negative relationship between the independent variable and divorce as adults ( $r = -.08$ ,  $p<.001$ ). As respondent scores change on the independent variable from 1 (intact parental marriage) to 3 (having divorced parents), the likelihood of lower occupational prestige in their own lives increases.

Concerning educational attainment, adult children of divorce and adults whose parents were absent are less likely to achieve, than adults from intact families of origin (see Figure 4.). Thirty percent of adult children of divorce did not finish high school, compared with 48% of the absent parent group, and 26.6% of the intact parent respondents. Thirty five percent of adult children of divorce have completed high school, compared with 34.5% of intact and 27.7% of absent parent respondents. Adult children of divorce obtained a four year degree 5.6% of the time, as did absent parent respondents, while 9.8% of the intact had their bachelor's degree.

These differences are statistically significant, with a chi-square value of 521.86 ( $df=44$ ,  $p<.0001$ , see Table 3). Pearson correlations suggest a negative relationship between the independent variable and divorce as adults ( $r = -.05$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Percentage distributions indicate no difference between adults with absent or divorced parents, and a large difference between these and the intact parent group.

The family income dependent variable did not emerge completely as hypothesized (see Figure 5). Twenty three percent of adult children of divorce were living in poverty, while intact families comprised 21% of the poor, and 32.6% of the absent parent group were poor. Adult children of divorce reported a low income 25.3% of the time, children of intact families 23% of the time, and 23.9% of children with absent parents had a low income. Moderate income levels were reported by 25.1% of adult children of divorce, 24.3% of the children of intact families, and 21.5% of the respondents with absent parents. High income was distributed among 26.6%, 22%, and 31.7% of the divorced, absent, and intact parent groups, respectively from these findings. It appears that children with divorced parents and those from intact families are roughly equal in their family income as adults, but that absent parent children achieve lower levels of income as adults. Table 3 shows results of significance tests (chi-square = 190.59,  $df=6$ ,  $p<.0001$ ;  $r = -.07$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

#### Research Question 4

Research question 4 states that adult children of divorced parents perceive themselves to encounter higher levels of life stress than adult children of intact marriages. Data analysis supports this assertion. The number of stressful events occurring in the five years prior to interview was higher for adult children of divorce than for any other group (see Figure 6).

Among adult children of divorce, 20.9% reported no traumatic events, 39% reported one event, 27.2% reported two events, 11.6% reported three, and 1.3% reported four or more events. Among the absent parent group, 22.3% reported no traumatic events, 45.4% reported one event, 26.5% reported two events, 5.4% reported three, and 0.4% reported four or more events. Finally, among the intact parent group, 26.7% reported no traumatic events, 42.6% reported one event, 25.4% reported two events, 4.5% reported three, and 0.7% reported four or more events.

These differences are statistically significant, with a chi-square value of 90.60 ( $df=8$ ,  $p<.0001$ , see Table 3), suggesting a positive relationship between the dependent and independent

variables ( $r = .08, p < .001$ ). In other words, life stress events increase among those subjects in the parental divorce group.

This concludes analysis of four research questions, each designed to provide a statistical test of past research findings. As pointed out in the literature review, the body of research tends to propagate a belief in the devastating social, emotional, and financial impact of parental divorce on children after they have reached legal age as adults. The present study illustrates that such a simplified cause and effect view is incorrect. Far from simple, the issues faced by adult children of divorce are quite complex, and require more lengthy explanations.

Table 1

Intercorrelation Among Happiness and Satisfaction Variables.

	Happy	City	Hobby	Family	Friends	Health	Satisf.
Happy	1.00	.26**	.26**	.34**	.28**	.29**	.42**
Satcity		1.00	.29**	.24**	.31**	.19**	.62**
Sathobby			1.00	.33**	.37**	.30**	.71**
Satfam				1.00	.45**	.31**	.67**
Satfrnd					1.00	.31**	.70**
Sathealt						1.00	.64**
Satisf.							1.00

\* p &lt; .05      \*\* p &lt; .01

Table 2

Sample Demographics and Basic Statistics

Sex of Respondent	Frequency	Percent
Female	11,554	57.4
Male	8,571	42.6
Mean Sex	1.574	Std. Dev. .494
Age of Respondent	Frequency	Percent
23 - 30 years	3,332	16.56
31 - 40	4,526	22.49
41 - 50	3,590	17.84
51 - 60	3,388	16.83
61 - 69	2,962	14.71
71 & Above	2,327	11.57
Mean Age	48.399	Std. Dev. 16.533
Race	Frequency	Percent
White	17,247	85.7
Black	2,557	13.7
Other	321	1.6
Mean Race	1.159	Std. Dev. .407
Marital Status	Frequency	Percent
Married	14,600	72.5
Widowed	2,540	12.6
Divorced	2,141	10.6
Separated	844	4.2
Mean Marital Status	1.465	Std. Dev. .845
Level of Education	Frequency	Percent
Lt. High School	6,773	33.6
High School	6,694	33.3
Junior College	1,619	8.0
Bachelor Degree	1,744	8.7
Graduate Degree	1,873	2.3
Average Education	12.089	Std Dev. 5.629
Income	Frequency	Percent
Poverty	3,983	19.8
Low Income	4,031	20.0
Moderate Income	4,141	20.6
High Income	5,167	25.7
Mean Income	2.606	Std Dev. 1.138
Occupational Prestige	Frequency	Percent
Very Low	4,517	22.4
Low Prestige	4,960	24.6
Moderate Prestige	4,615	22.9
High Prestige	4,719	23.4
Mean Prestige	2.507	Std Dev. 1.110

Table 3  
 Significance Tests for Research Questions 1 Through 4.

Childstat with:	Chi-square value	DofF	^Pearson Corr.
Propensity for Divorce			
Divorce	215.47***	2	-.11***
Life Satisfaction			
Happy	69.08***	4	.06***
Satisfaction	136.33***	64	.07***
Socioeconomic Status			
Prestige	180.06***	6	-.08***
Education	512.86***	44	-.05***
Income	190.59***	6	-.07***
Life Stress			
Trauma5	90.60***	8	.08***

\* p < .05  
 \*\* p < .01  
 \*\*\* p < .001

^ Pearson Correlations were rounded to the nearest hundredth place.