Introduction to the Special Issue on Divorce and Its Aftermath

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When I taught the first graduate-level course in divorce at the University of Wisconsin, I was able to include in the students' required reading every published article about divorce. Now, three decades later, the situation has changed dramatically. As the divorce rates surged in the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, so did studies of the divorce process, its causes, and its aftermath. By its sheer numbers, divorce entered the mainstream and took its rightful place on research agendas.

In tandem with the increasing divorce rates, heated public debates about new legal reforms captured the national scene, and rapidly growing support for ''no-fault'' legislation challenged cherished societal values about individual rights. The conservative response was that by making divorce easier, it threatened traditional beliefs about the permanence of marriage and the interdependence of family and marriage. At about the same time, a California grassroots movement embracing joint custody blossomed into new custody legislation in the late 1970s. Not surprisingly, this call for removing gender as the primary criterion for custody paralleled the increasingly popular gender debates. As women fought for more equality in the workplace, a men's rights movement emerged, calling for more equality in the family. Because mothers and fathers had equal rights to their children in marriage, it followed that a reasonable solution was that divorce should not sever the equality of these parental rights. Thus, this radical notion, that parents should be joint custodians of their children after divorce, appeared as the best resolution to the gender dilemma.

That parents were actually capable of sharing parenting after divorce was revolutionary thinking. The writings of the mental health and legal communities presented divorced parents as battle-scarred warriors who were incapable of having a civilized relationship. It was further suggested that an ongoing relationship between ex-spouses was considered pathological. In 1977, *Family Process* published an article that reported on an in-depth survey of the attitudes toward divorce held by therapists, lawyers, and clergy. The findings in this heavily cited article revealed a ''general distrust of the ex-spouses' continuing involvement with each other . . . largely on the grounds that such attachments reflect separation distress . . . and they drain emotional and physical energies that would more productively be spent in forming new relationships'' (Kressel & Deutsch, 1977, p. 138).

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The debates continued over the next decade or so, and most states enacted some form of no-fault and joint custody legislation. Interestingly, these progressive divorce reforms were not grounded in research. While political struggles were increasing about these reforms, an absence of knowledge existed about the fundamentals of how parents could be helped to be civil in the midst of such profound family upheaval and, even more so, how they could function cooperatively across their newly structured dual households.

This lack of knowledge, along with the increasing pool of divorced couples, gave rise to new research agendas. Studies exploring the process of divorce, the dynamics of ex-spouse relationships, and the short-term effects of divorce on children proliferated. As we reached the 20-year mark of those couples who divorced in the mid to late 1970s, long-awaited findings based on longitudinal studies were published.

The study that captured strong media interest was the Marin County study (Wallerstein, Lewis, & Blakeslee, 2000). For the next decade, the pessimistic findings from this clinical study of 60 troubled families quickly became generalized to *all* children of divorce. The headlines read that divorce leads to long-term negative consequences for children. In academic debates, however, the generalization of these specialized findings was challenged as other studies yielding more positive findings were published.

Now that we have generated a significant body of research, we are faced with contradictory and controversial findings. Although differences in findings are not unusual in any topical area of research, they take on added currency in the field of divorce because they impact and shape policy decisions and affect legal and mental health practices. They are so tightly interwoven with our personal values and religious beliefs that discussion of the complex realities of divorce and its aftermath becomes submerged in polarized debates. One result is that these extreme positions bury the accumulating body of findings that reveal a more nuanced picture of divorce, one that defies sound-bite conclusions.

This continuing debate and ongoing confusion about the effects of divorce on children and families gives rise to this special issue about divorce and its aftermath. The preliminary discussions of drafts of many of these articles took place at the American Family Therapy Academy's Seventh Clinical Research Conference, Families After Divorce: Fostering Resilience, held in October 2004 in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Enthusiasm arising from that conference led to the conception of this volume.

It is not intended that the articles in this special issue cover the multitude of important issues or studies about divorce, but rather, they are intended to provide information in three general areas: (1) how the social context that embeds divorce affects our view, our research, and professional practice; (2) what the current research tells us about parenting and family relationships after divorce; and (3) what new research and theory about clinical practice and larger systems research-based intervention models are doing to promote better adjustment of families after divorce.

We begin with two analyses of the social context that help us frame what we know about divorce and how we come to know what it is we think we know. Together they provide an excellent understanding of the contextual basis for our research and clinical writings. Coontz (2007) looks at divorce as it is historically rooted in the concept of marriage and reaches the conclusion that our divorce rates are both predictable and stable. She brings a dose of reality to the frequent hysteria heard about how the high divorce rates are destroying our country. Adams and Coltrane (2007) use

a sociological lens to view the discourse on divorce. Analyzing three major newspapers from the time of the no-fault movement to the present, Adams and Coltrane conclude that divorce reform policy is no longer about divorce reform but instead has been coopted to be about marriage promotion. Strengthening marriages becomes interpreted as preventing divorce, so that programs and policy aimed at improving the lives of children and families after divorce are viewed as threatening marriage. Indeed, if the awarding of governmental funds in the Bush administration is the engine for supporting and encouraging research, divorce is now the dismantled caboose left behind on the tracks.

The next two articles focus on postdivorce family relationships. Kelly (2007) reviews the research literature on children's living arrangements after divorce. Based on that research, she makes suggestions about parenting plans that serve the best interest of children. Next, research findings are presented that challenge the view that divorce destroys family relationships. Based on findings from the fourth wave of my longitudinal study, I report on how grown children feel about their families 20 years after the divorce and how their parents' relationship, or lack thereof, continues to affect them in adulthood (Ahrons, 2007).

In the next section, Bernstein (2007) deconstructs the ''child of divorce'' paradigm, showing how it negatively impacts children. She then presents case material to illuminate the complicated therapeutic process of family restructuring after divorce. She concludes by turning her attention to the complex and controversial concept of reconciliation, grounding her views in tightly woven theory. Continuing the focus on clinical practice, Lebow and Rekart (2007) propose an integrated theory for clinical work with high-conflict families. They focus on those difficult and often protracted custody and visitation disputes, the ones that frustrate most family therapists. In the third article in this section, Katz (2007) explores the mediation process and explains how it differs from therapy. Using case illustrations, she shows how clients are helped to change through this process. The practice of divorce mediation is dominated by the legal profession, and Katz helps us understand how family therapists can adapt their skills to this new profession.

In the last section, we look at two early intervention programs that facilitate the continued involvement of fathers. Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, and Pruett (2007) discuss an intervention program aimed at helping low-income families reduce interparental conflict and increase the active participation of fathers with their children. Although the research is in its early stages, the authors present detailed design issues and programmatic information. How early intervention in the parenting process can help low-income fathers become involved and responsible parents is an important contribution toward improving the father-child bond. Finally, Cookston, Braver, and Griffin (2007) present findings from their ''Dads for Life'' intervention program. Although only noncustodial fathers participated in the program, mothers reported a decrease in interparental conflict. Their findings have important implications by showing that change in one person in the system expands to change in the couple system.

As a whole, these nine articles provide an interdisciplinary range of knowledge about divorce and how it affects families in our society. Much of the research and theory-building about divorce does not appear in family therapy publications. We hope that this special issue will provide family therapists with increased insight into the complexity of their work with families—not only during the divorce process but for years afterward as well—and stimulate the development of new approaches that help

these families cope more effectively with the dramatic changes that they are experiencing.

All the articles were reviewed in the normal peer review process. I want to express my appreciation to these anonymous reviewers for their comments, insights, and suggestions, which led to important revisions in all of the articles and helped to improve the overall quality of this special issue.

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