

Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development

Volume 6 | Number 6

Article 2

2006

Parents, Guilt, and Forgiveness: The Effects of Divorce on College Students Attending Private Christian Colleges

Kristin Deal
Azusa Pacific University

Follow this and additional works at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth



Part of the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), [Higher Education Administration Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Deal, Kristin (2006) "Parents, Guilt, and Forgiveness: The Effects of Divorce on College Students Attending Private Christian Colleges," *Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development*. Vol. 6 : No. 6 , Article 2.

Available at: https://pillars.taylor.edu/acsd_growth/vol6/iss6/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Association of Christians in Student Development at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Growth: The Journal of the Association for Christians in Student Development by an authorized editor of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.



Parents, Guilt, and Forgiveness: The Effects of Divorce on College Students Attending Private Christian Institutions

Kristin Deal
Graduate Student in College Student Affairs,
Azusa Pacific University

Abstract

With national divorce statistics on a rise, higher education should consider its approach to meeting the needs of students from these homes. Specifically, faith-based institutions must think about the effects divorce has had on the faith development of students from divorced families. Using individual interviews and a focus group, I researched the experiences and faith development of seven students from divorced homes attending three private Christian institutions in Southern California. The qualitative nature of the study gave voice to the unique stories of these students.

Introduction

Millennials are surging through the doors of higher education, forcing institutions to adapt to the changing needs of their generation. Many student affairs professionals are addressing the increasing presence of parents, who struggle to let go and are distinctly involved in the decisions of their children (Howe & Strauss, 2003). With a pronounced focus on involving parents, institutions have failed to notice the shifting face of the family. “America today is a multicultural, multilingual, and multifaceted place where the nuclear family is no longer the norm” (Daniel, Evans, & Scott, 2001, p.3).

In this paper, I will discuss the rise in students who come from divorced homes and the struggles they face in enrolling and persisting in college. Alongside these statistics, I will present the implications divorce has on the faith development of a student. Considering the previous research, I will present my study examining the effects divorce has on students attending private Christian institutions. Finally, I will give my findings and offer recommendations based upon the conclusions of my research.

Literature Review

Divorce and Higher Education

In 2003, there were six million divorced families in the United States (Statistical Abstract of the United States). What used to be considered a societal problem has become a societal norm. Institutions of higher education are beginning to reflect the greater population. Nationwide, only 40% of college students come from homes where their parents are still married (Nielsen, 1999). Freshmen classes depict the increase in divorce rates over the last 25 years. In 1972, 8.7 percent of freshmen reported that their parents were either divorced or separated; in 1999, the number had grown to 25.4 percent (Daniel et al., 2001; American Council on Education and University of California, 2002).

Today's students are more likely to live in a single parent home than any other previous generation. *Ninety percent* of children in 1960 lived with both biological parents until reaching adulthood. Today, this percentage has dropped to less than half of all children (McLanahan, 1999). Majorities of these divorced couples enter into other relationships and remarry with five years after the divorce (Teyber, 2001). Altogether, 75% of men and 66% of women remarry after their first divorce; however, the divorce rate increases in a second marriage, leaving one out of ten children experiencing at least two divorces of their parents before turning 16 years old (Hetherington, 1999; Coontz, 1997; Amato, 1999). Both parents are critical in the growth and education of a child; therefore, students who grow up in a one-parent home or experience a divorce during adolescence have greater academic challenges than children from two parent homes. Children coming from single parent families complete fewer years of schooling and are less likely to enter college as compared to children from two parent families (Graham, Beller, & Hernandez, 1994). This number further decreases for ethnic minority groups (Pearson, 1993). However, if a child's parents enter into stable remarriages within the first few years after the *divorce*; most children do not suffer long-term academic consequences (Hetherington, 1999; Buchanan, C., Maccoby, E., & Dornbusch, S., 1997).

A study in 1996 concluded that students living with one parent were half as likely as students from two parent families to enroll in the 50 most selective institutions as defined by U.S. News and World Report. In addition, students from divorced homes are "13 percent less likely to apply to any college, 16 percent less likely to be admitted, and 48 percent less likely to enroll" (Gose, 1996, p.35). Once enrolling at an institution, many students from divorced homes end up financially struggling due to the end of required child support payments. Unless college tuition was included in the divorce settlement, the student becomes responsible for the burden of paying for their education.

Faith Development Theory

Alongside social, mental, and physical development, faith development is imperative to growth, as it is profoundly related to the human ability to make meaning in life through a relationship with a Divine Creator (Fowler, 2004). Faith development theory is critical in understanding all students, but it is necessary to students who have a religious doctrinal belief and thereby attend a faith-based institution. Fowler's (1981) six stages of faith outline faith development throughout an individual's entire life. His fourth stage includes the years of late adolescence and adulthood. However, this stage does not address the transition stage between adolescence and adulthood.

Sharon Daloz Parks (1986, 2000), building *from* Fowler's model, created a new stage of faith development, which she titled *young adult*. This stage is the transition stage between adolescence and adulthood, which would include most traditional college students. Parks' work is established in previous cognitive and psychosocial research of student development theory. Parks considered a person's form of knowing (cognitive development), form of dependence (affective development), and form of community (social development) as the three changing components between adolescence, young adult, and adulthood (Parks, 1986). These three forms characterize faith development. For young adults these forms are distinguished as probing commitment, sense of self-authority, and a mentoring community. Through probing commitment (form of knowing), young adults recognize the complex nature of the world and find it necessary to choose a future path. An emerging sense of self-authority (form of dependence), describes the young adults' trust in their own knowledge and experience, helping to create an inner-dependence. Finally, young adults need a mentoring community (form of community) in order to promote critical self-awareness and a sense of belonging (Parks 2000). In this stage of young adult, college students gain the needed challenge and support to further faith development into that of a mature adult.

Although many students venture through these changing components as they journey toward adulthood, each student's past experiences give light to or diminish their ability to make meaning. In considering the changes from one stage to another, Parks acknowledges the effect ones past can have on these transitions. Using the metaphor of a shipwreck, Parks describes how a threat to the most central structure of ones-self can cause a collapse at the very core of ones existence (Parks, 1986). These experiences can come about from the loss of a relationship or the reordering of ones life due to a choice, including divorce. When someone washes up on the shore, after surviving a shipwreck, he/she can experience a new understanding and a deeper faith. Students that experience a parental divorce enter higher education having already experienced one or more of these shipwrecks, thereby affecting the path from adolescence to adulthood. Considering the rise in students from divorced homes attending institutions of higher education and the impact of faith development upon a students' sense of commitment, inner-dependence, and community, it is crucial for student affairs professionals to understand the needs of this unique student group.

Methodology

This qualitative research study used four individual interviews and one focus group to investigate the experiences and effects of divorce upon students attending private Christian institutions. I chose qualitative research in order to give voice to the participating students and depict each unique experience. Three Christian liberal arts institutions in Southern California provided the setting and participants for the study. Two of the institutions were mid-size universities and the third was a small college. The use of three different institutions gave a variety of student experience while validating the possible effects of divorce upon students. Altogether, I interviewed three seniors, two juniors, and two sophomores. Four of the students were female and three were male. The average number of years that their parents had been divorced was 15 (minimum = 10; maximum = 19). The reasons for divorce included; adultery, drug abuse, alcoholism, change in sexual preference, and irreconcilable differences. I tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews, to give accurate representation of student experience. Within this study, I used additional means to validate the data, including member checking with students from the individual interviews, thematic organizing, and having my transcripts, codes, and notes reviewed by another researcher.

Results

“But the thing is, divorce *affects* so many people’s lives and I didn’t do anything, but divorce affects my life a lot. It’s a big part of who I am and how I see the world,” expressed one student.

After interviewing seven students from divorced homes, I found that there are countless effects of divorce upon their lives. Considering these stories, three themes emerged; views of parents, college experience, and faith integration.

Views of Parents

One student recalled, there was a really, really hard, bad custody battle, one in which I lost a lot of trust in my parents, because in a custody battle the kid is put in a place where they are forced to choose between parents and that’s never a good thing for a three year old child. [*sic*]

Through the process of divorce, children redefine their understanding of the parent-child relationship. Using metaphors, the students depicted the parental role in different ways, but never as a relationship between a child and parent. The most common view was parents as friends. This relationship described a loss in trust; the student is friends with one or both parents, but does not respect their authority as an adult. One student shared that she is friends with her parents, but not good friends. She cannot accept her parents’ advice because their decisions lead to the break-up of her family. Another student added that as a child, she felt more responsible than her father and did not let him have authority over her as a parent; therefore, they became friends instead.

The second metaphor depicted parents as strangers. One student recalled his dad getting remarried, and with a bit of uncomfortable laughter he stated, "I didn't even go to the wedding. I wasn't invited." Another student talked about his parents in this way, "I describe it now that my parents in a lot of ways were strangers to me, cause I didn't know the first thing about them."

College Experiences

Getting into College

For students coming to college from a divorced home, there are additional struggles that they must overcome. Questions of enrollment and financial aid become major topics.

"Applying to college was interesting... my dad had no say in anything, I didn't want him to have any claim over my future because he contributed to my college education" Many of the students expressed a desire to break from one parent or both parents because of the struggle over college. Four of the students described that one of their parents was against them attending a Christian institution or has asked them to transfer because of finances. One parent refused to co-sign a loan in order to keep the student from attending the specific university. The most common struggle is with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form. This form requires the income status of both parents if the student is still a dependent. A sophomore said, concerning his FAFSA, "My mom pays for everything but they [financial aid office] still try to get my dad's information...I'm 19 and that [child support] stops when you are 18.... My dad's money is not my family's money. It's two separate households."

To Be Known

"None of my close friends here are from divorced families," shared a student. On a Christian campus, divorce is rarely discussed. Students who come from divorced homes feel they are scarce. "They [other students] assume that almost all our parents are still together cause we are supposed to be perfect Christians that come from these Godly parents and stuff. *[sic]*" Some students struggle to keep their family and their family's past out of the school setting because they are either ashamed or embarrassed that they do not have the perfect home. A female student described one time when her father and his girlfriend came to visit. She felt ashamed because her dad had a girlfriend whose appearance was embarrassing. Yet, another student shared that he struggles to bring his family to school because he is ashamed of his parents and feels that people will not accept him because of his family. These students expressed pain as they shared what it is like to have part of their life be a mystery to others. In the end, one student admitted, "Yeah, it would be nice to be known in that way."

Guilt.

The final college experience addressed the topic of guilt and holidays. As the interviewer, I did not ask any direct questions concerning holidays, rather students themselves brought up this topic. A junior described in depth his schedule for holidays and responsibility to spending time with both parents. Christmas Eve with one parent,

Christmas Day with the other, and Thanksgiving switches between the two parents each year. However, the struggle goes deeper than the mere location.

Every year you go home for Christmas and you don't know where you are supposed to be and you feel guilty for spending certain moments of the week with a certain parent and really guilty for not spending it with the other... you can never satisfy the two parents because they both want all of you.

These students do not return home after a long semester to relax in good company. They spend their breaks moving back and forth between both parents, carrying guilt with them. They worry that one parent might be jealous of the other and work hard to be everywhere to avoid an even more stressful vacation. One student gave a vivid description of her Thanksgiving, "I just couldn't, there was too much to handle and everyone at home wanted their piece of me or their time, or wanted to give their input on something and I couldn't take it all in. I couldn't accommodate everyone. [sic]" For many students, academic breaks and holidays are a time of rest and rejuvenation; however, for students from divorced homes, it is a time of tremendous guilt and struggle.

Faith Integration

My mom actually said to me, 'God did not short change you by giving you your dad and you need to forgive him and move on.'... And that's been a process. It wasn't like I woke up one day and said 'I forgive you.'

I asked about the role that personal faith played into the students' understanding of what it means to come from a divorced home. In each interview, students addressed the topic of forgiveness. For these students, being able to forgive one or both parents is a big step in understanding what it means to be a Christian. Forgiveness is not merely a statement to be uttered, but a linear process that takes time, patience, and prayer. To forgive a parent *takes the student* one-step closer to reconciliation with the past. One student said, "The Bible says God hates divorce, and there is a reason that marriage is so sacred in the way he designed it. I think forgiveness is something the Bible teaches...but something that when you come from a divorced home you might struggle with." Three of the students talked about the improvement in their relationships with their parents as they came to know this biblical principle and created their own understanding of forgiveness in the case of divorce.

"So the funny thing is that as I did that [forgave him], as God changed my heart in that, and as I prayed a lot about that, my dad actually changed a lot too. Which I actually didn't expect. It was just such an unexpected blessing."



Discussion

In all the experiences, it is important to consider the role of the individual institution, of higher education, and of the government in aiding these students to enroll and persist through college. Unless institutions of higher education and governmental agencies recognize the needs of this growing group of students, access to quality of higher education becomes limited to those who come from two-parent homes.

Individual Institutions

Institutions need to consider the holistic development of the student, including faith development. Considering Parks' model of the young adult, students coming from divorced homes have moved beyond probing commitments and have created an inner-dependence. Due to the shipwrecks they have experienced, these students have a strong sense of the complex world in which they grew up. Most are extremely self-motivated and have a strong concept of their own knowledge and learning. However, these students are in need of a community to come alongside and support them. One student commented that Christian institutions could offer family mentors to students from divorced homes, giving them the chance to see and experience a healthy marriage, family, and community. Other students talked about how their bosses, roommates' families, friends' families, professors, and other staff have provided them with the opportunity to experience healthy relationships, communities, and family dynamics. These experiences are vital in supporting these students as they grow and learn what it means to be part of the body of Christ.

Higher Education

Diversity is a widely addressed topic on college campuses. College student affairs professionals work hard to create an environment where diversity can not only flourish but can challenge students to become more inclusive and understanding. However, many students coming from divorced homes feel excluded from the diversity dialogue. Family background is a type of diversity that needs to be included in discussions about welcoming and understanding those that are different. On most Christian campuses, students from divorced homes are a minority group but their differences are not addressed. One student said, "Divorce is one of those topics in the Christian church that people don't talk about because it is 'those people' that do it. Those that really don't follow Christ." If Christian higher education does not recognize familial background as an important diversity topic, students who come from divorced homes will continue to feel marginalized and unwelcome in the academic setting.

Government

The government needs to reconsider federal financial aid. The FAFSA assumes that even after a divorce, both parents will contribute to their child's education. Some parents, after a divorce, work hard to send their children to college. However, those students who depend financially on one parent need to be given the opportunity to only claim one income. With this student group rising in population, the government needs to provide them with adequate resources to help ensure student success.

Conclusion

I feel frustrated when I think about it [diversity] and I feel like people do make a lot of effort for people of other cultures and ethnicities to share their stories and experiences because they would enrich the community... but I feel like the story of my family is really rich and that in college there is not a context that is welcoming for me to share.

For the students I interviewed, it was important that their stories, experiences, and voices be heard. These students carry difficult, painful, and complicated stories. Student affairs professionals need to create a safe and welcoming space where students can share their own stories and lives and in doing so enrich the community.

References

- Amato, P.R. (1999). Children of Divorced Parents as Young Adults. In E.M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting, and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective* (pp. 147-163). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- American Council on Education and University of California. (2002). *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall, 2002*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute. U.C.L.A. Graduate School of Education and Information Studies.
- Buchanan, C., Maccoby, E., & Cornbusch, S. (1997). *Adolescents after Divorce*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Coontz, S. (1997). *The Way We Really Are: Coming to Terms with America's CF*. New York: Basic Books.
- Daniel, B.V., Evans, S.G., & Scott, B.R. (2001, Summer). Understanding Family Involvement in the College Experience Today. *New Directions for Student Services, 94*, 3-13.
- Fowler, J.W. (1981). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Fowler, J.W. (2004). Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium. *Religious Education, 99*(4), 405-421.
- Gose, B. (1996, July 12). Study Finds Children of Divorced Parents Less Likely to Enroll at Selective Colleges. *The Chronicle of Higher Education, 42*(44), A35-36.
- Graham, J.W., Beller, A.H., & Hernandez, P.M. (1994). The Effects of Child Support on Educational Attainment. In I. Garfinkel, S.S. McLanahan, & P.K. Robins (Eds.), *Child Support and Child Wellbeing* (pp.317-354). Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.
- Hetherington, E.M. (Ed.), (1999). *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting, and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Howe, N., & Strauss, W. (2003). *Millenials Go to College*. New York: Vintage Books.
- McLanahan, S.S. (1999). Father Absence and the Welfare of Children. In E.M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Coping with Divorce, Single Parenting, and Remarriage: A Risk and Resiliency Perspective* (pp. 117-145). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Nielsen, L. (1999). College Aged Students with Divorced Parents: Facts and Fiction. *College Student Journal, 33*(4), 543-72.
- Parks, S. (1986). *The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Parks, S. (2000). *Big Questions, Worth Dreams: Mentoring Young Adults in their Search for Meaning, Purpose and Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pearson, B.Z. (1993). Predictive Validity of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for HispanicBilingual Students. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 15*(3), 342-357.
- Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2003 123rd ed. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
- Teyber, E. (2001). *Helping Children Cope with Divorce*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.