

Religious Influences on Protectiveness among Adult Children of Divorce

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In a series of interviews with adult children of divorce, Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) found that the persons in their study reported having fear of commitment and long term relationships. The results of her twenty-five year longitudinal study led her to conclude that the experience of divorce forces children into an adult world in which they are unprepared. After marital dissolution, parents may ask opinions of or advice from their adolescent offspring. They may share disappointments in their marriage with their very young children. If extended family members keep their distance, their children may be the only ones the newly divorced parents may trust and with whom they are able to feel vulnerable. This role reversal may be only temporary. And the actions of these parents are understandable considering the isolation and loneliness often experienced post divorce, however this is not the most appropriate role for children to play. In seeing their children as their sole confidants, parents may become emotionally dependent on children during this period (Wallerstein et al. 2000).

Many adolescents take the initiative to protect and console their distressed parents. Yet, they are at risk of sacrificing their own well-being for the sake of their newly single parents. This relationship is not always appropriate, since children have no life experience with adult relationships. Adult children from Wallerstein's study became emotional caregivers and protectors to their divorcing parents. They were exposed to subjects they had little life experience in dealing with, yet it became the dominant pattern in which they related to others. As a result, many take on this care taker role in their future occupations and relationships. Adult children of divorce may pursue the helping fields such as nursing or social work. (Wallerstein et al, 2000).

The present study addresses the following research questions: what is the influence of divorce on the likelihood that children will want to protect their parents? Secondly, what is the influence of divorce on the likelihood that children will feel too responsible for taking care of their mother, father, or siblings? And finally, what is the influence of divorce on the likelihood that children will see their father and mother as good people?

The Young Adult Children of Divorce data set was collected through a telephone interview of 1506 adults living in the United States who are between the ages of 18 to 35. About half of whom had parents who divorced and half who did not. The survey contains questions on their pre-adult experiences, experiences of divorce, religious background and relationship with their parents. Furthermore, questions also pertain to current life satisfaction and marital experiences.

The present analysis uses propensity score analysis. PSA entails two phases. First, covariates are selected and used to distinguish between two groups; one of these is usually called a 'treatment', the other 'control.' Based on modeling of the probability of being in the treatment group, Phase I analysis yields estimated propensity scores, where a propensity score (for an entity or individual) is defined as the probability of being in the treatment group, conditioned on the covariate values for that individual. Typically, estimation of propensity scores has been based on logistic regression. At Phase II of

PSA, individuals are sorted on the basis of their propensity scores into a small number of strata. Done effectively, PSA yields covariate distributions that are similar across treatment and control groups within each stratum. If – big *if* – the observed covariates 'cover' the fundamental differences between treatment and control groups – differences usually identified with 'selection bias' – a PSA based on observational data can serve nearly as well as a randomized experiment to assess outcomes.

About 750 adult children of divorce were matched with 750 adults from intact marriages. Respondents are matched based on basic demographic characteristics: gender, household income, education level. They were also matched according to measures of religious involvement. They were matched according to denominational affiliation and religious attendance in their youth. Additionally, respondents were matched according to the level of stress they experienced growing up, and how much they felt like an adult while growing up.

Several outcomes were examined. Measures of protectiveness were tapped by respondents' answers to the following question: "I felt the need to protect my mother/father emotionally." Measures of unhealthy care-taking of family members were gauged by their answers to the question: "When you were growing up, did you feel too responsible for taking care of your mother/father/siblings." Measures of perceptions of their parents were measured using the respondents' agreement with the following statement: "My mother/father is a good person."

Results from the propensity score matching analysis confirm my hypotheses. Adult children from divorced families are much more likely to feel they needed to protect their mother/father emotionally, than adult children from intact families. Furthermore, adult children from divorced families are much more likely to feel they were too responsible for taking care of your mother/father/siblings, than adult children from intact families. Also, adult children from divorced families were less likely to see their mother/father as good people, than adult children from intact families.

When matching adult children of divorce with adult children from intact families, parental divorce influences several tendencies for adult children to report the need to protect their parents when growing up. Furthermore, adult children from divorced families show a greater trend towards feeling too responsible for their mother, father or siblings while growing up. These respondents were matched along demographic, religious, and family environment predictors. Findings from the present analysis show that even when matching respondents based on religiosity, adult children of divorce report more emotional protectiveness and too much responsibility in care-giving towards parents than adult children of intact families. These findings beg the question: to what extent was emotional care giving and protectiveness a burden for children? Wallerstein et al. (2000) asserts that this relationship is inappropriate since children are exposed to things they have little life experience in.